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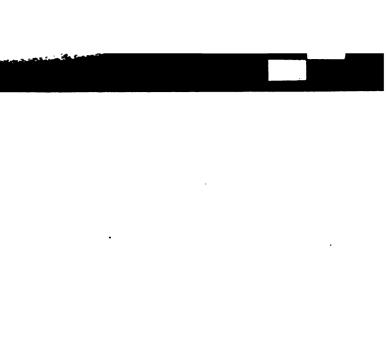
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"I beg your pardon, Andrew; I thought you were alone." Page 10

ISABEL GORDON CURTIS AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN FROM WOLVERTON"

WITH FRONTISPIECE
BY ALONZO KIMBALL



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THE-PLIMPTON-PRESS [W·D·O] HORWOOD-MASS-U-S-A



TO MY HUSBAND FRANCIS CURTIS

TO AVOID THE SAME LAPSE THAT BEFELL ENOCH WENTWORTH I CONFESS THAT THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THIS STORY WAS WRITTEN BY MY HUSBAND WHO DESIGNED IT FOR A SHORT STORY

"IT IS NOT A SHORT STORY," I OBJECTED; "IT IS MERELY AN INCIDENT WHICH MUST SHAPE THE CAREERS OF TWO MEN"

"IF YOU CAN VISUALISE A FUTURE FOR THEM"

HE REPLIED, "DO IT." FROM THIS

CAME THE STORY



CONTENTS

CHAPTE	1							PAGE
I.	THE BOND		•	•	•	•		8
II.	THE MEASURE OF A MAN	•			•		•	20
Ш.	Cassiopea's Chair							3 1
IV.	THE PLAY							46
V.	THE FORFEIT OF THE BOND							60
VI.	STEPPING OUT—DOWNHILL							78
VII.	THE QUESTION OF HONOR							95
VIII.	MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN							109
IX.	THE BREAD LINE							123
X.	A MAN OF HONOR							138
XI.	ZILLA PAGET							155
XII.	THE VOLKS							170
XIII.	A PRIMA DONNA OF THE PA	LST						184
XIV.	A SEALED BARGAIN							195
XV.	THE OPENING NIGHT							201
XVI.	MASTER ROBIN TULLY .							215
XVII.	WENTWORTH SHOWS HIS HA	ND						235
XVIII.	THE GREEN TURQUOISES.							243
XIX.	THE IRONY OF FATE							251
XX.	A BREAK IN THE WAVERLE	y I	PLA	CE	H	ом	E	270
XXI.	An Everyday Miracle .							275
XXII.	FROM THE TOP GALLERY.							287
XXIII.	FACING THE SITUATION .							294
XXIV.	THE PARTING OF THE WAYS	3		•				3 00
XXV.	THE YELLOW ENVELOPE.							3 06
XXVI.	IN THE DAYLIGHT							319
XXVII.	A MORAL LESION							326
XXVIII.	BEHIND THE CURTAIN							348



CHAPTER I. THE BOND

F course the game ended with a consolation pot. Merry and Wentworth, each with his last chip in the middle of the table, called for a show-down. All but Singleton dropped out, and he, the big winner of the evening, took the pot. Wentworth and Merry were broke.

The game had been played in Wentworth's library. Before its close the gray light of the morning began to steal past the curtains and the glow of each electric lamp took on a murky haze. Enoch Wentworth, acting as banker, cashed in the chips of the winners. Three of the men put on their hats, said "Good morning," and went out. Andrew Merry sat beside the baize-covered table with its litter of chips, pulling slowly at a cigar and staring into vacancy.

"Do you mind if I open this window?" asked Wentworth. "There's a chill in the air outdoors that will feel good. I've swallowed so much smoke my throat feels raw."

"Open every window in the room if you like, old man. I'm going home."

Merry took his hat from the bust of Shakespeare on which it hung dizzily, giving a rakish air to the pallid face of the master.

"Hold on a minute," cried Wentworth unexpectedly. "I'll go you just one more hand."

"You'll do what?" Merry demanded, incredulously. "Good Lord! don't you newspaper fellows ever know when you get enough? What's the good? I'm broke, and so are you. No, I'm through; I've had enough poker for all time."

"I'm with you there," the other man agreed. He stood meditatively for a moment before he continued, speaking almost impulsively. "I'll tell you what. Let's play one big stake for a last hand and then swear off forever."

"I tell you, Enoch, I haven't a cent. Heaven knows how I can tide over these

months until the season opens. It's a good thing I'm not a married man." Merry laughed mirthlessly.

"One last hand!" pleaded Wentworth.

Andrew turned irresolutely. He sat down with his long, slender legs stretched under the table. Wentworth, with an inscrutable face, gathered the cards into a neat pack and sorted the chips into orderly piles of red, white, and blue.

"What do you want to play for?" Merry turned up a coat sleeve and stared at his cuff buttons thoughtfully. "I have nothing left but these. I don't think I'll put them up."

"We've thrown away enough money and collateral tonight," Wentworth replied. "Let's make this stake something unique—sentimental, not financial."

"What, for instance?" Merry flecked the ashes off his cigar and turned to look curiously at Wentworth.

"Well," Enoch spoke slowly with his eyes bent upon the chips he was gathering inside his hollowed hand, "well, why not make it your future against mine?"

"That's a great stake! Sha'n't I throw in my past!"

"No, let each of us play for the other's future. It is a mere fancy of mine, but it appeals to me."

"Are you serious? What in God's name would you do with my future if you won it — what should I do with yours?"

"I tell you, it's a mere fancy of mine."

"All right. Carry out your fancy, if it amuses you. I ought to be willing to stake my life against yours on any hand, if you say so."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, if you want to call me."

Andrew Merry smiled and blew a flurry of smoke rings into the marble face of the Shakespeare, while he watched Wentworth's pen hurry across a sheet of paper. The newspaper man handed it to him with the ink still wet.

"There," he said, "we'll play for that document, the winner's name to be written at the top, the loser to write his name at the bottom."

Andrew Merry read it aloud:

To -----

I hereby pledge myself to you until death—
to do your every bidding—to obey your every
demand—to the extent of my physical and
mental ability—you to furnish me with
support.——

"Will that hold good in law?"

"Just so long as the loser is a man of honor — no longer. Are you going to weaken?"

"I'll be damned if I am. I'll put this bit of paper in my scrapbook."

"The man who wins, keeps that bit of paper," Wentworth answered with a whimsical smile.

He tossed the unsigned bond into the center of the table and shuffled the cards with grave deliberation. Merry lit a fresh cigar and puffed it meditatively. Upon each listless brain began to dawn the realization that this was a stake of greater import than the rolls of bills which had grown lighter and lighter till the last greenback vanished.

"Who'll deal?" asked Wentworth.

"We'll cut." Merry spoke quietly. "Low deals, ace low."

Enoch Wentworth cut a tray, Merry a

seven spot. Wentworth shuffled the cards again and held them out to his opponent.

"Does one hand decide it?"

"Yes, one hand. Each man to discard, draw, and show down."

Wentworth dealt with noticeable deliberation. They picked up their hands.

"Give me four cards," said Merry.

"I'll take three." Wentworth's face was as solemn as his voice.

For a moment each man sat staring at his hand. Then Merry spoke.

"There's no use in showing down," he said. "I haven't even one little pair."

"Hold on!" expostulated Wentworth, scarcely concealing the relief which his friend's admission gave him. "I'm only ace high. Does that beat you?"

Merry's face also told its story of reaction. "Same here," he said, laying the card on the table face up, "and a jolly little king to follow it."

"King for me, too." Wentworth's face flushed and his voice grew impatient. "What's your next card?"

"A ten," Merry replied tranquilly, too

tense to wonder why Enoch awaited his declaration.

"Ten here. My God! are they all alike?"

"Seven next."

"And mine's a seven!"

Both men paused, each with his eyes on the other's card.

"And a four," cried Wentworth irritably. He passed his hand across his forehead; it was moist and cold.

"You win." When Merry tossed down his hand a tray turned over — it was the same tray which gave Wentworth the deal.

Wentworth had drawn to an ace and ten. Merry held up a king. The younger man lifted a pen, dipped it in the ink, and scrawled Enoch Wentworth across the slip of paper. At the bottom he wrote with grave deliberation, Andrew Merry, and handed the paper to Wentworth. The newspaper man stared at it for a moment, then dropped it on the table, laid his cheek on the palm of his hand, and, looking straight in the face of the actor, asked: "Merry, do you realize what this means?"

"Not yet, perhaps; still I wish you more luck of my life than I've had. Now, since I'm

to look to you for support, could you scare up a nickel? I've got to ride home, you know."

Before Wentworth could reply, the curtains parted, and a girl's figure showed itself for a brief moment.

"I beg your pardon, Andrew, I thought you were alone," she said, and the figure vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Who's that?" Merry demanded.

Wentworth's only answer was to pull out the lining of his pockets. From one he produced a quarter and handed it to the actor. Merry pocketed it without further questioning, and pulled on his gloves.

"Good night," he said, "or good morning, whichever you choose."

"Say, old man." Wentworth held the door for a moment half closed while he spoke. "Say, if you don't mind, let's keep this transaction to ourselves."

"I'm willing." Merry paused to strike a light for his last cigar, then he laid his hands solemnly across his breast. "Cross my heart," he added in a sepulchral tone.

Wentworth turned out the light, ran up the shades, and pulled a chair to the window.

He looked down into Washington Square. Old newspaper man as he was, with eyes accustomed to the grav of the dawn as well as to the searching sunlight, the outside world looked strange and unreal and drowsy — the great world of New York, which is never laid wholly to sleep. A fog, drifting in from the North River in torn gray remnants, clouded the drowsy world by fits and starts out of existence. For a moment he had seen Merry walking with a slow, thoughtful saunter across the square: then the fog dropped its bewildering veil and the figure disappeared as completely as the thin shape in a ghost story fades out of existence. Wentworth started, then laughed nervously: the fog was playing strange tricks. A moment later he saw the tall, slender figure transformed into a wraith moving across the deserted square with a listless stride. Suddenly it again grew real, for a gust of wind from the sea blew the fog into fragments and the pallor of the morning was shot by the beams of a rising sun. watched Merry peer up Fifth Avenue in search of a 'bus. Evidently none was in sight, for the comedian buried his hands in his pockets,

stretched himself on a bench, and waited. Wentworth started at the sound of an opening door. A girl entered.

"For Heaven's sake, Dorry! what are you doing up at this unearthly hour?"

"I've had my sleep, you haven't," she answered with a laugh.

"Dorcas, sit down," said her brother. "Do you see that fellow on the bench under a tree?"

The girl leaned a hand on Wentworth's shoulder while she turned her eyes in the direction his finger pointed.

"Yes! What's the matter with him? Is he anybody you know? Is he in trouble?"

"He's an old friend of mine. It's Andrew Merry, the comedian."

The girl laughed. "What a name for a comedian!"

"His name has been stock in trade to him."

"Is he clever?"

"Very clever. I almost said tremendously clever. He has twice as much genius as he realizes. Merry never—"

"There! he caught a 'bus," cried Dorcas. "He's gone. Tell me about him."

Wentworth sat for a moment gazing into his sister's beautiful face. She was a child in spite of her eighteen years. He felt like an ancient, sin-battered, soiled, city-worn hulk of humanity as he returned the straightforward gaze of her gray eyes.

"Tell me about him, Enoch."

"I ran across him when I was doing dramatics on the Pittsburgh Union. A dancer, once celebrated, came to town with a vaudeville company, the worst ever! I went back to interview her, but she wasn't feeling well and refused to see me. In a dark passage a tall young chap ran into me and apologized in a courteous fashion. I liked his voice and manner. Though I had been leaving for the office - I'd had enough of their show - I went in front and sat out his turn. It redeemed the whole program, and he deservedly got more applause than the dancer did. looked for his name and found it a new one to me — Andrew Merry."

"When was that?"

"Fifteen years ago. I went to the stage door and met him going to his dressing-room. He was a genial lad, but there wasn't much for

him to tell an interviewer. He had been born and raised in a Western town and then apprenticed to a country bank. He hated figures and loved the stage. He stuck to the ledgers for a while because he was all his mother had. I guess she worshiped him."

"How did he happen to go on the stage?"

"Came on to New York, as they all do sooner or later, and began with a turn in a vaudeville house. He had reached a salary of fifty a week. He was perfectly happy except for one thing — he couldn't get the mother's loneliness out of his mind. They wrote to each other every day."

"I think I should like him," suggested Dorcas.

"I gave Merry all the space next morning instead of the dancer, and he wrote me a grateful letter. I didn't see him again until two years later, when I came to New York. I found his name in the cast of a light opera company on Broadway. He was pretty far down the list, but before the thing had run two weeks he was moved up to second place. His work was unusual. He's the funniest Merry Andrew I ever saw, yet once in a while

there's a touch of whimsical, tearful pathos in his antics that makes a man — wink."

"Take me to see him," cried the girl eagerly.

"We'll go tomorrow. It's his closing night in 'The King at Large.' He's a bigger favorite than several of the big stars, yet — it's the queerest thing — in all these years he's never taken the step that would bring him to the top."

"Why?"

"The Lord knows! Every time he makes a new hit you hear the prophecy, 'Merry will be starred next season.' Three or four managers have planned it, even announced it, and Merry has been as jovial as his name over it."

"Why wasn't he starred?"

"Can't tell. One manager died, another went under. It's the uncertainty of stage life."

"And his mother?" asked Dorcas.

"She died suddenly last season. A fool usher gave Merry the telegram in the middle of a performance, when he went off the stage. He dropped as if he'd been shot.. They rang down the curtain until the understudy could

get into his togs. He didn't act for two months. I thought he would never brace up. I had him here half the winter trying to cheer him. He gave me the dumps."

"Poor fellow," cried Dorcas.

"I roused him through his pride. He hadn't a cent to his name, so I shamed him into going back to work. He earns lots of money, but it gets away from him."

Wentworth's gaze turned to the litter of chips on the table. His sister's eyes followed.

"Is it that?" she asked.

"Partly."

The girl rose to her feet. She put her hands on her brother's shoulders and gazed down into his face.

"Enoch," she said hesitatingly, "I wish you wouldn't. You could help your friend if you would turn over a new leaf yourself."

"We both swore off tonight for good and all, little girl." Wentworth took her hands between his own and looked into her eyes with a resolute look. "I want you to help both of us — Merry and me. The evil of the world was never whispered inside convent walls. You've left a quiet, simple life — for a very

different world. There's more mission work waiting you right here than if you had taken the veil."

"Enoch," the girl's face was grave and earnest, "Enoch, nothing would ever make me take the veil. I have only one ambition—I want to go on the stage."

"Good Lord!" cried Wentworth, "I never dreamed of such a future — for you."

"It is the only future I want." A tone in her voice made her brother look up with a startled expression. He recognized it as a tone he himself had used several times in his own life when he had met some obstacle which had to be surmounted.

"You don't like the idea?" asked Dorcas quietly.

"I can't tell until I think it over. You've knocked me down like a tenpin. I had no plan except to keep you beside me, to have you turn a vagrant bachelor into a steadygoing, domestic old chap—the sort that dodders about in a garden and raises squabs."

Dorcas laughed at the picture.

"You don't know stage life as I do," Wentworth continued seriously. "There are

women — and men for that matter — who go into the profession clean skinned, clean souled. They spend their lives in it and come out clean; but there are experiences they never forget."

"Is life as bad as that?" the girl asked simply.

"Life is as bad," her brother answered slowly, "and yet I would as willingly see you go on the stage as into society — I mean fashionable society, as I know it here in New York. A newspaper man sees the under side of life."

"It would not hurt me." The girl tossed back a heavy braid of hair which fell over her shoulder, and knelt at Wentworth's knee.

"I have you always to turn to, big brother," she whispered. She laid her cheek fondly against his hand. "Don't you remember that used to be the only name I had for you? You were so big, so strong, so wise and so — old. I used to sit on the gatepost, waiting for you to come home. Don't you remember our Saturday tramps, how we used to play 'I spy' in the orchard, and went bird's-nesting, picnicking, and fishing, or playing Indian camp on the island?"

Enoch clasped her hands tightly. "I remember, little Dorry. They were the happiest days in my life."

"Let us get out of the city," cried the girl. Their eyes turned to the sunlit square below. The morning rush of New York life had begun, with its clang of bells and thunder of vehicles.

"Come in," he called, in response to a tap on the door.

An old colored servant put his head in hesitatingly. "Anything you want, Marse Enoch?"

"Nothing, Jason. Oh, yes, clear up that table. And say — I've sworn off from playing poker; it robs a man of his sleep. You like an occasional game yourself, so I'll make you a present of the whole outfit. Carry everything away, Jason; put the stuff where I can never lay eyes on it again."

"Thanky, Marse Enoch, thanky."

"Now, Dorcas, I'm off to bed. I haven't shut an eye for twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER II. THE MEASURE OF A MAN

WEEK later Wentworth and his sister left town for a vacation. They had discovered an old-fashioned farmhouse on a quiet stretch of shore, and settled down contentedly to a simple, outdoor life. One morning a telegram broke their solitude.

"I have half an hour to catch a train to the city," said Enoch, as he tumbled out of a hammock. "You may drive me to the depot if you wish, Dorcas."

"You're not called back to that hot office," she cried wistfully, "after a vacation of only three days?"

"It isn't the paper, Dorcas; it's Merry. Get into the buggy; I'll tell you about it on our way to the station. You may drive." He leaned back comfortably in the wide seat. "You like driving, I don't."

She tightened the reins over the stolid back of the brown mare, in response to which action it started out of the yard in a leisurely trot.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

"What's the matter with Mr. Merry?" Dorcas asked. "Is he ill?"

"Not that, but he's in danger of killing his career. He's going up the state to a little one-horse town to play leading rôles in a ten, twenty, thirty stock company."

"Why does he do that?"

"I guess he's broke. I ought to have looked him up before we left town, only — it was hot, we were busy, and it slipped my mind."

"Why should he wire you about it?" she persisted.

"He has a way of relying on my judgment. In this case, at least, it's a good thing he has. Merry is just where a crazy move like this would tell on his future."

"What are you going to do?"

"I can't tell until I see him. I'll be back tonight, or tomorrow at the latest. I'll wire you what train. You'll meet me, won't you?"

"Of course," she promised.

Next morning the two men stood on the platform of the smoker on a shore accommodation train, which sauntered from one small station to the next, skirting the water for

miles. The quiet tide crept in with wrinkling waves over the flat, white sand. At sea, white sails scudded before the breeze. Inland stretched wide salt marshes, their green splashed with pink marshmallow blossoms. The air was warm and full of salt.

Andrew Merry tossed a half-smoked cigar into a swamp beside the track where the thin, green blades of cattails were whipped by the breeze.

"I don't believe I want to mix odors this morning," he said. "When one gets into a wilderness like this he wonders how any human being can endure the city in summer."

"It is great ozone." Wentworth lifted his hat to let the wind cool his head. "When we swing around this bend, we'll be in sight of Sachem's Point. There's the little station now! I'll bet that speck of white is Dorcas!"

"How queer that I've never met your sister," Merry suggested.

"I did not bring her to town until she left the convent, you know. Bachelor's Hall wasn't exactly the place for a little girl."

"Is she grown up?"

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

Wentworth laughed. "Almost," he admitted. "You did see her once."

Merry followed Wentworth as the train stopped. In a half-dazed fashion he shook hands with a tall young woman in a white linen gown. Was this the child—long limbed, gawky, and shy—he had imagined he might meet? Somewhere back in his mind lay an impression that Enoch had referred to his sister as a young colt. The thought was so absurd that he smiled; any coltish awkwardness must have disappeared with short frocks! Merry stared at the girl with bewildered admiration, wondering now why he had never felt the mildest curiosity about Wentworth's sister. He became conscious that he was making a mental analysis: she had blackfringed gray eyes; warmth and dancing blood glowed in her face, for she had the coloring of a Jack rose: a mass of auburn hair was coiled in a loose knot at the back of her head: she wore no hat; a band of dull-blue velvet was tied about her head and fell in a loose bow over her ear, but strands of hair, which glowed like copper in the sunshine, had escaped and blew about her face; she had the tender mouth

of a child. In the straightforward eyes was sweet womanliness, gentle determination, and a lack of feminine vanity which Merry had seldom seen in the face of a beautiful woman. He even forgot to drop her hand while he gazed into her face, half admiringly, half perplexedly.

"By Jove, Enoch," he said, "this is the apparition I saw that night at your house—I had no idea—I thought it was a little sister, a youngster in short frocks and—"

"That describes the Dorcas of six years ago. I lost breath myself when I went to bring her home after graduation."

"It isn't fair to a fellow — a surprise like this! He doesn't have his wits about him." Merry's tone was apologetic.

Dorcas laughed, then suddenly flushed scarlet.

"I've brought Mr. Merry down to stay with us till we go home," Wentworth announced.

"I'm delighted," cried Dorcas cordially.

Next morning after breakfast Enoch and his sister rowed out to deep water with their fishing outfit. Merry was still in bed; he was tired, he pleaded, and could not immediately acquire the habit of early rising.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

"What do you think of Andrew?" asked Wentworth abruptly. He lifted his head after the task of baiting a hook and looked into his sister's face.

"I think he ought to be waked up."

"To join our fishing trip?"

"I mean waked in his ambitions. He seems to me like a man who has no goal in sight. He needs something to work for."

"You have sized him up, Dorry, even in these few hours."

"I had a long talk with him last night on the piazza while you were with Farmer Hutchins. He is so droll and clever in a quaint, quiet, original way, and yet I found the queer touch of pathos you told about."

"That's where his remarkable hold on the public comes in."

"He spoke last night of one ambition he has —"

"Sort of moonlight confidences?" queried her brother.

"No — not that. He was awfully in earnest. He wants to get away from comedy and do something which would touch the heart of an audience. His name holds him back for

one thing. As he said, 'Fancy me playing *Hamlet* under the name of *Andrew Merry*.'"

"It wouldn't be an easy proposition."

"I suggested breaking his design gently to the public, taking them into his confidence bit by bit, and to let his emotional work gradually make larger breaks in his comedy."

"Not a bad idea."

"He can't see it that way. He's determined to jump straight into a part that will wring the heart out of his listeners."

"That's foolish. The public wants just so much versatility. You can't kill off a beloved comedian to resurrect a new emotional actor, no matter how good he may be. People won't stand for it."

"He told me about the part he opens with in September. In one scene he gets stuck in an elevator and is left there half frozen, half starved. The only person who can release him is an old maid who is in love with him, and because it is leap year she proposes. He doesn't care a rap for her, but accepts her to get free."

"Merry has been wanting to get in with a [26]

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

Berg production. Now he's there with a big part and a big chance to make good."

"He isn't satisfied." The girl pulled up her line and tossed away a morsel of nibbled bait, covering the hook with a fresh clam.

"Some greedy fish had a square meal off your bait and never got the hook in his gullet. He'll come back for more, then get caught. It's the same way with human beings."

"Philosopher!" laughed Dorcas. She dropped her line again into deep water and waited for her brother's prediction to come true.

Merry had breakfasted before their return. He sat upon the vine-grown piazza, gazing at the sparkle of the ocean, when the two agile figures stepped across his vision.

"Well, Sir Lazy, so you're up!" cried the girl. "You should have been with us to find an appetite. See our fish! Here's a dinner for you!"

"I'm going to turn over a new leaf," said Merry. His eyes were fixed on the girl's glowing face, and for the moment he shared her intense enjoyment of life.

"Will you turn it over tomorrow morning at sunrise?" she demanded.

"Even so soon, most gracious lady." He swept her a stage bow, his soft hat trailing the ground as if it had been a cavalier's cap loaded with plumes.

Matching his grace, the girl turned to him, laughing, with the mock dignity of a queen.

"I command that at early dawn, when the tide goes out, ye hie thee to you flats and dig clams for our savory meal."

"I shall obey, most Royal Highness," answered Merry solemnly.

"Oh, I say, Dorcas, give him an easier task. I swear I draw the line at clamming. Have you ever tried it?" Wentworth asked, turning to the actor.

"I've watched folks clam," Merry smiled. His eyes were turned upon Dorcas, who still carried her fishpole as if it were a scepter.

"It's the nastiest job on earth," grumbled Wentworth. "You wade barefoot through black mud and scoop up a squirting thing once in ten minutes. You come home with a lame back, gashed hands, sodden feet, and

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

with more straight dirt soaked into you than a week of baths will touch."

"My queen has commanded!" answered Merry, jauntily.

"I would advise thy queen to assign thee a cleaner task!"

"She is obdurate," said Dorcas haughtily.

"I go, my royal lady," Merry cried.

"I believe he is waking up," thought Dorcas as she ran upstairs to dress for the noon dinner. "If he does that, I'll believe he has some backbone."

When Dorcas and her brother came down next morning for breakfast, Merry had disappeared.

"I've been watchin' him between times when I was bakin'," said the farmer's wife. "He's done a good mornin's hunch of work. There he is, comin' up the beach now — he's close by the old spruce tree. I'd say he had a load by the way he's walkin'."

"I'm glad I'm not your victim," said Wentworth, with a note of sympathy in his voice.

"Enoch," the girl turned to him gravely, "I told you he needed waking up, and this is a good start. It won't hurt him a bit."

"Poor Merry! What a sight!"

They watched him come tramping over the beach. He wore Farmer Hutchins' overalls rolled up to his knees and a flapping cowbreakfast hat. He carried a clam fork and occasionally shifted a heavy basket of clams from one arm to the other.

CHAPTER III. CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

her eyes with both hands and gazed along a stretch of rocky beach. The afternoon sun was high, its level rays flooding the world with a warm, vivid light. She paused for a moment to push back the strands of hair which blew into her eyes and to tie the band of velvet tightly about her head. Then she started with agile steps for a narrow line of rocks, which ran like a wall into the ocean. There were gaps to bridge and narrow footholds upon steep cliffs, but she leaped from rock to rock as steady-footed as a mountaineer.

She stopped on the crest of a cliff and looked down. A few feet below her, on a ledge like a wide shelf, Merry lay watching the waves as they broke against the jagged walls of a narrow cove.

"Day-dreaming, Mr. Merry?" cried the girl.

He sprang to his feet. "Why, I never [31]

heard you. Do you wear velvet shoes? Let me help you down." He began to climb the uneven steps.

"The idea of helping me down, after I have made my way alone over these chasms!" She pointed to the wall behind her. Then resting one hand on his shoulder, she leaped past him lightly.

"What a heavenly retreat!"

"Yes," answered Merry, dreamily. "I found it several days ago. I've called it Cassiopea's Chair."

"Who was Cassiopea?"

"I've forgotten. Some satellite creature, I believe. Her name has a restful sound, and this place is restful and lonely."

"Would you rather be alone?" Dorcas asked quickly.

He regarded her with wistful admiration. "Hardly that!" he smiled.

The girl laughed. "Were you day-dreaming?"

"I suppose so. I was watching these waves. Most of them break without a splash; then once in a while, away out as far as your eye can reach, you see one roll up, gathering force

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

from you can't imagine where, and it comes on tempestuously through a calm sea, to crash against the cliffs. Sometimes it throws its spray up here." He pointed to a wet line on the rock just below them. "Then again, one which promises to be a ripper amounts to nothing when it breaks."

"Yes it is fascinating," she agreed. "Yesterday I spent an hour watching them. It makes me think of people."

"What people?" he demanded, not understanding.

"All sorts. People who never do anything, who saunter through life and are the failures, and the few who live after their work is done."

He still failed to comprehend.

"They say, you know, that every ninth wave is the one which amounts to something. I've counted them. Whoever started that ninth wave story couldn't count — it's nearer the nineteenth. Sometimes it's the twenty-ninth. You can't calculate; they come with beautiful irregularity."

"Merry," in her intensity the girl addressed him as her brother did, "they make me [33]

think of you. You could make a towering big wave of your life. You don't!"

The man turned quickly and looked into her eyes with flushed face. He did not speak, but fingered a diamond cuff button listlessly. Dorcas despised that bit of jewelry, it seemed so unsuitable; still she had never seen him without it.

"Aren't you afraid of losing these — scrambling round among the rocks?" she asked.

"They belonged to my mother," he explained. "I don't care for jewelry, but somehow I got into the habit of wearing them. She was a mother such as few men have to remember."

"You loved her very much?" asked Dorcas gently.

"Very much." Merry's eyes went back to the inrolling waves. "Here's another big fellow—the biggest yet; it's about the thirtieth, I fancy."

Neither of them spoke for some minutes, then the girl's voice broke the silence. "I suppose your mother was ambitious for your future?" She asked the question hesitatingly, fearing to hurt his feelings.

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

"She had great ambitions." Merry's eyes were still turned seaward. "I was all she had. I tried — God knows I tried! — to do the work she picked out for me. She wanted me, like Father, to be a business man. It wasn't in me, even though I tried—for her sake."

"I understand —"

"I believe you do," said Merry gratefully. "You're different from most of the women I know. You're real. A man could make the best of himself — if you — insisted on it."

"I wish — oh, I do wish" — Dorcas' voice was like that of an ardent child. "I wish I could rouse you to make the best of yourself. There is so much you could do!"

"Do you really think so?"

"No, I don't think it, I know it. You are two people: one is lazy and indifferent, with just ambition enough to do the work you have to do. You can't help doing it well — you could not do it badly. Then there is the other — a man with vivid imagination, feeling, emotion, and ability; but it is so hard to wake him up!"

Merry jumped to his feet and stared down into the girl's face. "How did you learn [35]

this — about me? Has Enoch laid my soul bare to you?"

"Enoch told me something of your career, that was all. I know you better than he does. Once I wanted to study medicine. It seemed to me then as if a doctor's mission, relieving pain and fighting off death, was the greatest thing in the world. I gave it up."

"Why?" he asked, surprised by the apparent change in subject.

"I had not the courage for surgical work. It takes no end of bravery to amputate a limb. I am wishing now," the girl's face flushed, "that I had persevered!"

"I understand." The comedian spoke quietly. "It is curious how we do understand each other. Go straight ahead with your amputation. Men rake me over occasionally. Enoch does it. Women never do; instead, they nauseate me with flattery or compliments. No one has talked to me so that it sank in since Mother did it. She grew reconciled to my going on the stage and stirred me up to make the most of myself. I came back after a summer with her and

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

made the hit of my career — in a part, too, which was rotten. Now go ahead."

Andrew pulled the soft hat over his eyes and sprawled out on the rock ledge.

Dorcas began with a nervous laugh. "It sounds like—presumption, I know so little of the world, only I have been studying you—"

"Am I worth the trouble?" he interrupted.

"Worth the trouble! I don't believe you know yourself yet. You have a wonderful imagination and such knowledge of human nature. You could write a great play, many of them possibly. You know men and women. You have laid bare the souls of some of them when you talked with me. After you bring a being into life, think how you could make him hive again on the stage. Enoch took me to see you in 'The King at Large.' When you were capering about, tuning your pipe, flirting with the peasant girls, and playing highwayman, you gained thunders of applause. You were funny. Sometimes I laughed until the tears came. The tears came again, they almost blinded me in one scene, when you command the soldiers not to steal the old woman's pig."

"The audience howls over that," said Andrew morosely.

"Not all of them. I saw people here and there who understood."

The man's smile was boyish. "When I got that part I saw tremendous possibilities in it. The author had only half worked up the character. I rehearsed it as our stage manager directed, then I spent a week in retouching it. I wrote in new lines and changed situations. I talked it over with Mrs. Barrows — she plays the old woman, you remember. She's an artist. She saw the opportunity for unusual work. We asked leave one day to rehearse it in our way. The company stood around silent; they couldn't help being impressed."

"Then you didn't play it that way?" asked Dorcas incredulously.

"No." Andrew spoke moodily.

"Why?"

"My child, you don't understand human nature. We threw the stage manager into a beautiful grouch. The author swore. Dunderhead! I haven't forgiven him yet."

"Why should he not have been grateful?" persisted Dorcas.

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

"Jealousy, professional jealousy. They knew the value of a bit of feeling in that mess of trash — but let it go in? Never! The situation had not occurred to either the stage manager or the author; it had been concocted by a poor devil of a comedian, who was paid to writhe his legs, leap across the stage, play his pipe, sing driveling ditties, and speak sillier lines. Fisher would rather have seen his play go under than utilize my idea. The queer thing is that it made a hit, an extraordinary hit. They don't get me another season. They're trying now — they've offered three times to raise the salary. I'd starve first."

Merry's laugh was a disagreeable one.

Dorcas jumped to her feet. "Andrew Merry, go to work! Show them what you can do, if for nothing else than to please me and prove that I haven't made a mistake."

"Miss Dorcas, sit down."

The girl looked at her companion curiously.

"Let me shake hands on a bargain," he laughed. "That's a foolish little ceremony I used to go through with Mother when I

was a boy. If I promised faithfully I would do anything, I shook hands on it."

Dorcas held out her hand cordially. Her clasp was magnetic.

"Sit down again and listen," he begged.
"For years and years and years I've had a play crystallizing in my mind. It's all blocked out; the scenes, situations, and characters are real to me, even the lines are ready to write. Its people are as much alive to me as you are. It hasn't taken shape — simply because it's easier to sit and watch the waves roll in than to write. Let me tell you about it."

Dorcas sat leaning forward, her face between her hands, her eyes glowing with interest.

"My hero is cashier in a bank, a young fellow of good family, jovial, happy-go-lucky, generous, democratic. He has married the bank president's daughter, who is exactly his opposite — cold blooded, haughty, selfish, and fond of luxury. There is a sweet, tender little daughter. The love between the father and the child is beautiful. The man, trusting to luck to see him through, steals for years,

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

covering his defalcations in the cleverest way. He had to get money, for his wife denies herself nothing. The father-in-law discovers the crime, exposes it to his daughter, then drops dead. She gives her husband up to public His trial comes off and he is seniustice. tenced to twenty years. The child is told that she is fatherless. The wife takes her father's fortune and goes West. When the second act opens she has divorced the husband and married again. The child is a lovely, true-hearted woman. She is engaged to the young mayor of the city, and preparations are afoot for the wedding, when she receives a letter from the one man who remained loval to her father. — an old ianitor at the bank. He tells her the story which had been hidden from her. The father, penniless, broken down, hopeless, is to leave prison in a few weeks. She confronts her mother. who denies the story, but later confesses. The girl breaks her engagement, leaves home, and goes East. The old ianitor takes her to live near the prison until her father is released. Every day she watches the convicts at their lock-step tramp and sees her father. The

closing of that act, when she meets him leaving prison, can be tremendous in human interest."

He turned to look at Dorcas.

"Go on," she said.

"The last act is laid in a New England village, among simple country people. The girl and her father are living on a little farm. Her lover comes, having searched for her everywhere. She tells him the story. He marries her and takes the father home with them."

Merry paused. The sun had dropped below the horizon and the western sky glowed in red, gold, and purple.

"When," cried Dorcas in a flush of enthusiasm, "when will you begin to write?"

"At once, tomorrow. I'll go away somewhere; I can't do it here."

"Go to Enoch," she said. "He will be delighted. He has such faith in you and he loves you. Besides, you'll have his sympathy. Poor Enoch, the one ambition of his life is to be a famous dramatist."

"No?" said Merry incredulously.

"Don't tell him you know it. I discovered
[42]

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

it by accident. I was tidying his desk one day. I came on a pile of manuscript. There were dramas, comedies, tragedies, even comic operas. He has been writing that sort of thing for years and years."

"Queer he never told me! What were they like?"

"Don't think me disloyal, but they are awful! You know his vivid, galloping, newspaper style. He tried to get away from it in a play. He grew mushy and stilted. He knows they are bad. He has never shown anything to a soul, and yet I think it was like going to confession to tell me. Some day, when he gets a great plot, he thinks he will succeed. He won't. It was cruel to tell him so. He's nothing but an expert newspaper man."

"Dear, good, generous old Enoch!"

"You will never tell him - never?"

"I won't," said Merry.

They sat for a few minutes in silence. The flush of the sunset began to fade from the sky. Seagulls wheeled above their heads.

"We must go home," said Andrew. "Crossing these rocks in the dusk would be perilous."

Dorcas rose and followed him, clasping his outstretched hand. When they leaped down from the sea wall to the beach, the girl asked: "This is our last evening here?"

"I imagine so. You go to New Haven next week, don't you?"

Dorcas nodded.

"Think of me working with all the courage and energy you have awakened. When the play is written I will bring it straight to you."

There was eager anticipation in her eyes. "When you come I will ask a favor. May I play the daughter of the convict?"

"You!" Andrew stopped and looked down at her intently. "You — you — dear child, you sweet, gracious woman!"

Dorcas lifted her cool hands to her blazing cheeks.

"Listen! You don't think I could do it. I could. I have loved Shakespeare since I was a little girl. I know Juliet and Desdemona and Rosalind, but I've lived with Cordelia, I've loved her. I've seen into her soul. Your girl is Cordelia. I could play the part even if I have never been on the

CASSIOPEA'S CHAIR

stage. Besides I can work; oh, you ought to see how I can work when I have to!"

"It is not that," Andrew protested. "You could play Cordelia — we'll call the girl 'Cordelia' now — as no one I know. It is not that. It is such a hard life — the one you would choose, and it is so different from anything you know."

Dorcas spoke impatiently. "Enoch said that. If I should go on the stage I would be no different from what I am today."

"Let us go home. There's Mrs. Hutchins' supper horn."

They walked on in silence. That evening Merry sat for half an hour with an idle pen in his hand. At last he pulled a sheet of paper toward him and wrote in feverish haste.

Dear old Enoch — Send me \$100 to the Broadway today, please. Don't ask questions, don't try to find me: I'll turn up when I've finished some work.

Your slave, Merry.

CHAPTER IV. THE PLAY

NOCH WENTWORTH sat before a table littered with sheets of manuscript when a knock sounded on the library door.

"In a second!" he cried. Then he tried to gather the pages together in numerical order.

"All right," cried a cheerful voice.

"Lord, it's Merry!" whispered Enoch. He sorted the sheets hurriedly, and a smile creased his face when a piping voice began:

"There was a man named Jared,
There was a man named Jared,
Ja-a-red-red-red,
Ja-a-red-red-red,
There was a man named Jared.

He had a son named Enoch, He had a son named Enoch, E-e-noch-noch-noch, E-e-noch-noch-noch, He had a son named Enoch."

The comedian's fingers went rat-tat-tat on the panel with each syllable.

THE PLAY

Wentworth swept the sheets of paper into a drawer of his desk, then he rose and opened the door. Merry stepped into the room with a dancing light-hearted gaiety that Enoch had seen him don with his stage garb. Still it was accompanied by a dignity of manner odd to the comedian, a dignity which had self-respect behind it. The man's face seemed younger. He had lost the listless, devil-may-care expression. His new-fledged dignity showed in more careful costume. Wentworth put an arm about him affectionately.

"Have you come into a fortune, Boy?" he asked with a laugh.

"Better than that — I'm on the verge of making a fortune."

"Good!" Enoch pushed him into a comfortable chair and stood looking down at him. Then he laughed happily, as if good fortune had come to himself.

"Tell me about it. Who's going to star you and in what?"

"Things haven't reached that point yet, but they will mighty quick."

"Let's have the news, Boy."

"I will. Be patient just a moment longer."

"Where have you been for a month?"

"Buried in the rural delights of Harlem, in a six by eight room, humble meals, studying and working, twelve — thirteen — fourteen hours a day."

"Harlem! Good Lord! and I here alone. I fancied you were in the Adirondacks, under the trees."

"My loafing days are over," cried Andrew briskly.

"I'm glad to hear it." Wentworth's voice grew warm in its heartiness. "Were you studying a new part?"

"Ye-es, a new part. The greatest part of my life. I'm letter perfect in it."

Andrew lit a cigar and laughed gaily. "Where's Miss Dorcas?"

"Dorcas? Oh, she left three days ago to visit a school friend in Baltimore."

Wentworth was tidying his desk when he spoke. If his eyes had not been turned aside he would have seen the disappointment which clouded the actor's face.

"Say, Boy," Enoch turned around, "tell me what you've been up to. I'm confoundedly in the dark."

THE PLAY

"I will," answered Merry slowly. "I've got to — I want your advice and help. I need it as I never needed it in my life before. Only — I'm not going to trot out a word of it until we are sure of a couple of hours clear. I can't stand a solitary interruption — today."

Enoch was accustomed to Merry's imperative moods. He rang up his office, gave a few orders over the telephone; then he called his servant and ordered a fire in the "den." A few minutes later logs were crackling in the grate of a small inner hibrary, which Dorcas called Enoch's "holy of holies."

"Now, Jason," said his master, "remember, I'm not at home to a soul. Look after the 'phone; I'm also out on that."

"Yes, sah. I sha'n't let nobody in."

The men retreated to the den. Wentworth shut and locked the door, then he opened a small cupboard.

"What'll you have?" he asked, lifting down a couple of glasses.

"Nothing." Andrew pulled a large envelope from his pocket and sat down beside the fire. Wentworth faced him with an expectant look upon his face.

"You never guessed, I suppose, that I'm an incipient playwright?"

"Never!" Enoch's tone was emphatic.

"Well," Merry laughed hilariously, "well, I am, I'm the coming dramatist."

"I take off my hat to you, Boy." Enoch swept him a pantomime bow.

"Wait a minute." The comedian's face grew unusually resolute. "Wait, old man, you've got to take this seriously, or I won't tell you a blessed word about it."

He sat fingering the pages of a manuscript.

"I've had dreams of achieving success, dreams of being rich and famous, of my name sagging with honor. It's queer, though, it was never as an actor that I wanted to achieve fame. It was as the author of a play, the greatest play that's been staged in a decade. I don't care so very much for money; it's fame that I want."

"You are a cormorant!" Enoch smiled.

"Why don't you say I am an egotist? That's how I look to myself. Still, it isn't egotism — exactly. It's my lifetime dream coming true, and I have done the work better than I had even hoped I could. Lord, don't

THE PLAY

I know good playwriting when I see it! Many a time I've earned my salary twice in making an actor hide the shortcomings of the author. I tell you, Enoch, this is great." He pointed one long, slender finger at the sheets of paper on his knee.

"Lucky dog! Go ahead. I'll say, when it's finished, if I agree with you."

"In a minute." Merry rose and laid his hand on Enoch's shoulder with an imploring gesture. "Dear old man, I want your help and guidance. I'm such a blamed unbusiness-like chump. If you hadn't been head and right hand and mother, father, and brother to me for years, as well as the truest friend a man ever had, I'd have been in the gutter." He shifted his hand affectionately to Wentworth's arm. "Half the pleasure I got out of this work was the thought of coming to you with it and hearing you say that it's worth while. The world's verdict of it won't count for a picayune beside your opinion and what — one other person says. Enoch." Merry's face flushed, "if I win out, it means more to me than fame or wealth — it means the happiness of a lifetime."

"Andrew! A woman at last."

The actor nodded gravely. "Yes, a woman at last."

"Not Drusilla?"

"Oh, curb your curiosity," he laughed lightly; "you can't have everything at once. Now I'm going to read."

Wentworth lit a cigar, leaned back in a leather chair, and turned his eyes steadfastly upon the man opposite him. Merry was a singularly dramatic reader. Across his face flashed each human emotion as he put it into words. Enoch forgot the outer world when Merry leaped into the words with which he had clothed a daughter's greeting to her outcast father — a father disqualified, hopeless, timid, stunned, dumb after the long separation from his fellows. There were not many lines for the convict to speak, the rush of speech belonged to the young Cordelia as she came into the story with a heart overflowing with pity, faith, and love.

Wentworth's cigar went out and he forgot to light another. He sat in utter silence, a silence which was half critical, although at moments he was deeply stirred, partly by

THE PLAY

surprise, partly by unconscious emotion. He breathed a half-stifled sigh. This task, such a splendid achievement, had cost one man a month's labor! He remembered the years of ardent toil he had spent on what, as he realized sadly, was poor. It was worse than poor—it was futile. Even Dorcas had sadly but truthfully acknowledged its impossibility.

His thoughts returned to Merry's drama. He followed the convict, broken by desertion and suffering, he watched courage revive which had seemed dead, he saw manhood return as it met human love and human fellowship. The pitiful story was not mere acting, it was as real as everyday life.

When Merry spoke the last word and the curtain fell, he looked up with triumph and joy shining in his eyes. Then he waited in silence, as if for ardent hands to clasp his own. It was an actor's pause for the thunder when he knows he has won his audience. Enoch's fingers lay clasped together on his knees, his eyes bent on the glowing caves of the coal fire. As the actor spoke his voice had a chill, shivering note in it.

"Say, old man, isn't it good? Tell me — don't you like it?"

"Like it?" echoed Wentworth. He turned his eyes straight on Merry's questioning face. "Why, Boy, it's magnificent. You'll pull Broadway to its feet with that. Only," he laughed in a mirthless fashion, "only I never dreamed you had it in you."

Merry reached across and gripped Enoch's listless hand. His smile was radiant. "I didn't know it myself — until somebody — waked me up. I see now — it was not because it failed to move you that you didn't applaud. It laid hold of you — you forgot one wanted such a thing as a hand."

"I imagine so. Merry, you've done a tremendous piece of work. That will live for — it ought to live for years."

"Thanks, old man, thanks with all my heart. You can't imagine how hard it was to wait for your verdict. When I finished the second act I jumped on the elevated and was half-way down town with the manuscript in my pocket, crazy to read it to you; then I pulled up and went back to work till it was done."

THE PLAY

"It's wonderful," mused Wentworth, "it's a corker!"

"Now, old man," Andrew jumped to his feet and began to pace the room impatiently, "I want to rush it on the stage — quick! Quick, I say. Hecht will take it, I know."

"I suppose you'll play the convict?"

"Good God, what else could I play?" Andrew stopped suddenly and looked down at Wentworth.

"You'll kill your reputation as a comedian. You can never go back to a part like 'Silas Bagg.'"

"'Silas Bagg!' Enoch, there have been moments when I wished 'Silas Bagg' was a flesh and blood creature. I would have murdered him and hid the body."

"It made your name."

"There's the irony of professional life. Perhaps you'll be interested in knowing that I've thrown up my part in 'The Left-over Bachelor.'"

"You have? Andrew, it's been announced everywhere that you were to play the leading part."

"I know it." Merry spoke nonchalantly.

He put his hands in his pockets and smiled. "Berg's furious; he threatens a lawsuit."

"You're foolish! It may be a year before we can get a theater and backing for this. You could be well billed all this season with Berg, and probably make a hit."

"No more doddering idiots for me! Why, it will be easy as sledding to get this on. I'll read the play to Estey — you've always said Estey had faith in my emotional work. He's rich as pink mud. He has no end of pull, he has brains and foresight. He can see this has a future!" The actor laid a hand upon the manuscript which lay on the table. "If Estey will go to Hecht and tell him he has a find, Hecht will jump at it and give us the first theater left open after something has failed."

"Andrew, you're a steam engine."

"Did you think I was a steam roller?"

"Well, it's waked you up. That's dead certain. Who did it?"

"The woman — I told you." Merry turned aside and stood with his back to Enoch, running his eyes over a volume he had lifted from a bookshelf.

THE PLAY

"I wonder," Enoch spoke meditatively, "I wonder if she realized what she was doing?"

"I don't believe she did." Andrew began to pick up the pages of manuscript.

"Say, old man," suggested Wentworth, "leave that with me over night. You've given me a lot to think about. I want to read it again — when I'm alone."

The closely written sheets fell reluctantly from the comedian's hand. He fondled the paper as if it were a beloved child.

"You'll be careful of it, won't you, Enoch?" he said anxiously. "It's all I have. My first draft was a garbled, dirty mess; I threw it away."

"Bless your soul, I'll be careful. When I've finished I'll put it in my safe. I'll have it typewritten tomorrow. Say, can't you stay all night?"

"I guess not. My head's afire. I'll take the Lto the end of the line, then I'll walk. I can do more straight thinking while I walk than any other time. I'll take a saunter round the cathedral. With the moon coming up it's a dream—it looks then like a big ancient ruin."

"What a poetic chap you've grown to be!"

Merry laughed. "Good night, old Pard; I'm grateful for your faith in me."

"Good night, Boy." Enoch gripped his hand. "I'm terribly glad to have you make good. Your play is wonderful."

Merry went down the stairs whistling. A few seconds later he turned back. He put his head in at the door and said in a melodramatic whisper: "Rush the business, my lord, I'm owing thee a hundred and much else. It shall be paid with compound interest from the first night's returns." Then he laughed and shut the door.

"A hundred!" whispered Wentworth. He dropped into the chair beside the fire and covered his face with his hands. The room had grown dark and it was so silent that when a cinder fell from the grate it made him start to his feet. He searched for a small brass key on his ring, hurried into the library, and unlocked a drawer in the desk. He took a slip of paper from a yellow envelope and stood staring at it for several minutes. His brows wrinkled and a curiously startled expression came into his eyes. He drew a long breath, put the paper back in the envelope, laid it

THE PLAY

in the drawer, and turned the key in the lock. He walked to a window, which looked down on the square, and stared at the life of the city. It was a habit of his. He had solved many a knotty problem with his eyes fixed unconsciously upon the busy street.

The thought spell lengthened out indefinitely, then ended abruptly. He hurried to his den, lifted Andrew's manuscript, and seated himself before the desk. From a lower drawer he took a heap of paper, filled the ink-well almost to overflowing, and tried several pens before he found one that suited him. Then, switching on the electricity under a green-shaded bulb, he began with steady laboriousness to copy Merry's play. The clock struck three before his task was ended. He gathered the manuscript into two neat piles. One he placed in his safe, the other he locked in the drawer which held the bit of paper he had studied so intently.

He returned to his chair beside the ghost of a fire, laid his face between his palms, and fought a battle between two antagonists, his conscience and temptation. He felt as if his very soul was in shackles.

CHAPTER V. THE FORFEIT OF THE BOND

HE telephone in Enoch Wentworth's room rang insistently.

He had gone to bed three hours before, and he struggled to shake off sheer, stupid drowsiness.

"It may ring itself into oblivion for all I care," he murmured; then he turned over and tried to pick up the thread of a fantastic dream where it had broken off. The jangling bell would not allow sleep. Into his memory flashed a thought of the Richards trial. New evidence might have come in for the defense. It had been expected to materialize yesterday; it would be wanted in full detail for the afternoon edition. He was thoroughly awake in a second and out of bed. Wentworth was first, last, and always a thorough newspaper man, ready like a war horse to sniff at the smoke of battle. He rushed to the telephone. Its ring had become peremptory.

"Hullo," he called briskly.

"Hullo, old chap," Merry answered him gaily. "The top o' the morning to you."

"Good morning." Wentworth's alertness died in a second. Something flashed back to his mind, something unpleasant, and an ugly frown corrugated his brow.

"Grouchy this morning?" cried Merry with a laugh. "Or say, did I wake you from your beauty sleep?"

"You certainly did."

"Old man, I'm sorry, blamed sorry. Enoch, you didn't sit up all night over that play of mine?"

"I did — sit up all night — over that play of yours."

"You're a trump, old Pard, the truest, best friend a fellow ever had. Some day I'll show you I'm grateful. I couldn't sleep last night, I lay thinking of something I can do for you when my production begins to pay. I'm going to drag you away from the everlasting grind. We'll go to Switzerland next summer and carry out your dream. We'll sit on mountain tops, crane our necks over the edge of a crevasse, and skid down a glacier."

"I'd rather go back to bed," growled Wentworth.

"You lazy old duffer, you may go in a second, only I want to talk to you about the luckiest sort of accident. Last night I ran across a fellow who's rolling in money. He's crazy to get in on a theatrical venture. We can catch him, I know. I want you to have a big share, to manage the thing and make all you can out of it."

"Say, Merry," the question went like the snap of a whip over the wires, "you didn't tell him about your — about the play?"

"No, I hinted that a friend and I had a big thing to produce. I got him interested in it—couldn't do more until I saw you. Following your advice you know, old man, always brings me out straight in the end."

"Did you tell him it was — your play?" Enoch's tone was brusque.

"No, I thought I'd break that gently. He thinks now I'm a devil of an actor; he might imagine I couldn't have so much versatility, that my play might be of the brand some actors turn out."

"Good," cried Enoch warmly. "You have more sense than I gave you credit for."

"Really? Now, old Pal, go back to bed. But tell me first when I can see you. I want a long talk with you."

"Make it four. I've a pile of work to do before that time."

"All right, four o'clock. Goodbye."

Wentworth hung up the receiver and passed a hand across his forehead; it was cold and damp. He did not return to bed, but dressed hurriedly, pausing once or twice to stare at himself in the mirror. His face looked unfamiliar. It seemed to have aged. There were lines about the clean-shaven mouth he had never noticed before. He ate breakfast quickly, then rushed down town and threw himself into the tumult of work on a big paper, not with his usual ardent love of labor, but as if he were trying to forget. His associates noticed it.

"What's the matter with Wentworth?" they queried of each other.

"He has a black dog on his back," suggested Flint, the sporting man.

"He's in love," said McMillan, the city
[68]

editor; "I've seen it coming on gradually."

"Shucks!" cried Flint, splattering his blotter with ink from an overloaded pen. "Shucks! Wentworth in love!"

At four o'clock Enoch sat in his library. A heap of newspapers lay on the table at his elbow. He held a magazine in his hand, but he was not reading it. He laid it down and met a reflection of his own face in a mirror over the mantel. It did not seem like the features he was accustomed to; it looked unhappy and lowering. He swung his chair around, leaned his elbows on the table, and took his head between his hands. He was so absorbed that he did not hear a step in the hall. When he lifted his eyes Merry stood before him. Wentworth stared for a second before he took the outstretched hand.

Merry had changed. He looked young, handsome, and vivacious—he was better groomed. A few stems of Roman hyacinths sat jauntily in his buttonhole. His trimness seemed odd in contrast to the old whimsical carelessness, as if he had already achieved fame and was living up to it, dressing up to

it. These were the thoughts that flashed through Wentworth's mind while Merry took his hands affectionately between his own. Andrew was only a few years younger than Enoch, but occasionally he fell into fond, demonstrative ways which were boyish. Wentworth drew his hand away suddenly and pointed to the low chair opposite. His friend sat down half perplexed, half anxious.

"Say, old man, aren't you well? You look groggy."

"I'm well enough."

"You're working too hard, you always did! You've had a hankering all your life to turn theatrical manager. A change of work is as good as a holiday. I want to put everything into your hands and have you swing it. There are no better hands in New York."

Wentworth did not answer. His eyes were studying a pattern in the rug beneath his feet.

"Say, Enoch, you're going to tend to the whole business, aren't you?"

Merry's voice held a faint tone of alarm. He was not accustomed to fits of apathy in Wentworth.

The newspaper man lifted his eyes. "Yes, I'm going to tend to the whole business. I'll make it the finest production that New York has seen in years. 'The House of Esterbrook' is going to win money and —fame."

"Good!" Merry jumped up and flung his arms around the shoulders of the older man.

"Sit down," said Enoch. "We're going to talk business."

He rose, walked to his desk, and emptied a drawerful of papers on the table. He added the contents of a second drawer to the heap, then gathered them together until they filled his arms, tumbled them in a litter outside the fender, and dropped to his knees on the rug. Merry watched him with a puzzled expression.

"You never guessed, Andrew, that your ambition was mine?" Enoch did not lift his eyes or pause for a reply. "For years and years and years I have dreamed just one dream, only one—that some day I might produce a great play. See how I worked!" He swept the manuscript into an untidy heap. There were thousands of sheets. He

had written on paper like onion skin. It looked like toil — one had a feeling of years of toil — after a glance at the laboriously interlined and reconstructed sentences. Wentworth crushed it mercilessly into loose bunches and began to lay the pages by handfuls upon the reviving fire. A little flame climbed up and kindled them into a wavering blaze.

"Here, here, Enoch, old fellow," cried Merry, "don't!" There was a thrill of compassion in his voice. "Say, don't — this is a wicked thing to do."

Wentworth paid no heed to him. gathered the sheets together with quiet deliberation, crushing them as one would crush some hated, despised living thing, and burned them with stolid satisfaction.

Merry grasped his hand and tore away a bunch of the pages. "Save them - who knows what splendid plot may be here. Now I'm a professional playwright we can do no end of stunts together."

"They're rotten," cried Wentworth fiercely, pushing Andrew aside; "rotten, I tell you. Why, Dorcas read them once - dear, kind, loyal, sympathetic Dorcas. She didn't say

a word when she laid them down. I made her tell me. Lord, how she hated to answer! She was honest, though. 'Enoch,' she said, looking up through her tears, 'it's lacking in something.' She did not have to confess it. I had begun to know it myself, months before. I haven't laid a pen to this sort of stuff since. I don't know why I kept it until today." He lifted the last of the manuscript, it made two big handfuls. The fire leaped up as if doubtful of being equal to its task, then a red blaze went roaring up the chimney. A minute later the grate was full of black ashes, which crackled and shivered, then seemed to fade away. Wentworth rose to his feet.

"That funeral's over," he said abruptly. "Now I'm in a mood for — business." He turned to his desk. Merry's eyes followed him. They were dim with unspoken sympathy, but he knew the man well enough not to put it into words.

Wentworth pulled out his key-ring, opened a drawer, and took the slip of paper from the yellow envelope. He stood staring at it for a moment. A wave of crimson swept across his face, then his mouth straightened into

a cruel, inexorable line. Merry's eyes were still fixed on him. He had only seen such an expression on his friend's face once. He remembered how intensely thankful he had been then that he was not the delinquent. Enoch did not speak, but crossed the room with the paper in his hand and laid it on the table beside Merry. Andrew's eyes took it in with one sweeping glance; it was the bond he had signed when they played that last hand of poker.

"Do you remember this?" asked Wentworth abruptly.

"Of course. Say, old chap, what has that to do with our business? Oh, I know." He lifted his eyes with a relieved glance. "Of course it's an understood thing you're to run things, and as for money, Lord, I don't care for money. Take all you want of it. It's fame my heart's set on; I've a grand ambition and a thirst for greatness—as I told you—but it runs in only one direction: to win a name as a dramatist, a name that will live when my capering days are over. I want a halo; not such an aureole as Shakespeare's," his eyes sparkled and a smile lighted

his face, "but a halo — I demand a halo. I'll be satisfied with nothing smaller than a cartwheel."

He rose and went prancing buoyantly about the room on his toe tips, humming a fantastic waltz from "The King at Large." He paused for a moment and kissed his finger tips lightly as he passed Wentworth, who sat with a grim, brooding look in his eyes. Andrew stopped to stare at him.

"Why so mum, sweet Sirrah?" he asked blithely.

"Merry," Wentworth spoke in an expressionless voice, "read that bond through—carefully. Read it aloud."

The actor picked up the sheet of paper and read it with dramatic gestures, bowing almost prostrate at each pause.

To Enoch Wentworth

I hereby pledge myself to you until death—
to do your every bidding—to obey your every
demand—to the extent of my physical and
mental ability—you to furnish me with
support.

Andrew Merry

He dropped lightly upon his knees in front of Wentworth when he finished.

"I await thine orders, most grave and reverend Seigneur." Then he laid his fingers upon Wentworth's arm and looked up with an expectant smile.

Enoch wrenched his arm free and rose awkwardly to his feet. The comedian drew back with a startled expression, as if fear struggled with bewilderment.

"You see," Enoch's voice was perfectly colorless, "your mental ability is pledged to me."

Merry stared at him, curious and perplexed.

"It is your mental ability which I claim now," Enoch said deliberately.

Andrew spoke in a hoarse whisper. "I don't understand."

"I demand your play!"

"You demand my play? To sell?"

"No; of course not." Wentworth jerked out the words abruptly. "Why should I want it to sell? I want to produce it — as mine, as one — I have written."

Merry moved toward him with an agony of terror in his eyes. "You want to take from me my one complete effort, my one ambition, my everything — the work which is making

a man of me, on which I have toiled steadily for weeks? You would do that! Do you understand — while I wrote I scarcely stopped to eat or sleep? When I did sleep I dreamed of it and —"

He stopped, too much affected to trust his voice. He laid one hand over the other as if to still himself, for he was trembling.

Wentworth stood looking at the younger man. Something cold and relentless crept into his eyes. He laid his hand on Merry's arm.

"Let me talk to you, Andrew."

"Talk! talk! you damned thief!" He pushed Enoch aside with quick repulsion. His face was blazing with wrath. He went tramping about the room in a vague, heedless, half-blinded fashion. A thought seemed to strike him abruptly. He wheeled around suddenly and faced the man beside him.

"Why in the devil's name, Enoch, should you do this? Have I ever done you one cruel, disloyal act in all my life?"

Wentworth did not answer. He returned the terror in Merry's eyes with a cool, stubborn glance.

"Did you have this hellish plunder scheme in mind when you drew up that bond?" he asked unsteadily. "What did you have in mind when you made me your slave?"

"I don't know — exactly." Wentworth turned such a straightforward gaze upon Merry that he realized the man was speaking the truth. "I don't know. I can't imagine now — why I did it. I have known you had great ability if it could be waked up, only I did not dream then you could do anything but act."

"You didn't wake it up," cried Merry. A sudden wave of red swept his face.

"As I told you that night, and I am telling the truth, it was nothing but a fancy of mine. When you came to me with this," Enoch's hand dropped on the manuscript which lay upon the table, "you came with a great temptation; it was too much for me."

"Evidently," cried Merry. His tone was withering in its scorn. He seated himself and his eyes turned fiercely upon Wentworth. The muscles of his cheek twitched as regularly as a pulse.

"The play is mine." Enoch seemed to

have grown strangely cool and impervious to contempt or anger. "The play is mine," he repeated; "it is the due and forfeit of my bond."

The eyes of the actor narrowed and he laughed savagely.

"Take your pound of flesh," he cried. "What will you do with it?"

"Everything we had planned." Enoch's voice was calm. "Give it a big production, advertise it as a play never was advertised before, and build up your fame as an emotional actor."

"What, will you not play the convict?"

"I! Of course not. There is only one actor in America who can play 'John Esterbrook.'"

Andrew rushed across the room in a blind fury. He stretched out his hand and dealt Wentworth a stinging blow across the mouth. "That actor won't play it. Do you understand?"

Wentworth lifted his arm fiercely, then it dropped nervelessly by his side. The veins rose in his neck and forehead like taut cords. He stood staring at Merry, who strode about the room in a demoniac fury.

"Do you know the penalty which follows when a slave strikes his master?"

The comedian turned aside with a maddened snarl. He tried to speak, but his tongue clicked against dry lips.

"My father was a Southern planter," said Wentworth with slow deliberation. "One day a slave rebelled. He struck my father in the face, as you struck me now. They took the nigger out, set him in a fence corner, and shot him. I was a little boy. I stood on the piazza watching. I saw him fall."

"God! you're not a man! You're a damned, low-down, scurrilous blackleg. And to think of you standing there, looking me in the face — God!" Merry raised his hand again as if to strike, then he dropped it by his side, shuddered, and dashed across the room. He picked up his hat and turned to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Enoch sternly.

"I'm going straight to — hell."

He lifted his gloves from the table. Beside them lay the manuscript of his play. He stretched out his hand and turned his eyes on

the other man, watching him as a thief might, who fears being caught in an act of robbery.

"Take it," cried Enoch. "I have a copy of it, a copy in my own handwriting."

Merry stood fingering the pages.

"What do you propose to do with your — swag?"

"Call it by a decent name. It belongs to me as justly as cotton did that was picked by my father's slaves. I propose to deal more liberally with you than he did. Money does not count with me in this transaction. You may take all the royalties. I want nothing but the authorship of the play."

"Nothing but the authorship —" Merry's glance was a malediction.

He dropped the pages and tossed his hat upon his head. Wentworth watched him curiously. The outer shell of the man had changed. His clothes, immaculate an hour ago, looked disheveled. A lock of fair hair strayed down over his forehead, his linen had a battered appearance, the white hyacinths drooped from his buttonhole like blossoms which had been touched by frost. He stood for a moment with the doorknob in his hand

staring at Wentworth, who returned his gaze with a cold, ruthless scrutiny. Merry's eyes fell before them. It was the first palpable concession to Enoch's stronger will.

"Goodbye," he said with an unsteady laugh. He closed the door behind him. Wentworth turned to the table, lifted the manuscript and stood glancing through the closely scrawled pages. Then he crossed the room, dropped it upon the red coals, leaned his head upon the mantel, and watched until each gray ash became a filmy atom of dust.

CHAPTER VI. STEPPING OUT—DOWNHILL

ASON, this is nobody I know." Wentworth sat staring at a card his man laid before him. He knitted his brows querulously. "Make him understand that I'm engaged."

"He's terrible masterful, Marse Enoch," said the darky apologetically; "he's boun' he'll see yo'. He's a gentleman all right. I don' believe I kin git rid ob him easy."

"Tell him I can spare ten minutes."

Jason ushered the visitor into Wentworth's library. He was a tall, distinguished looking man, with a fine, highbred face. His manners were exceedingly gracious, yet simple.

"I don't believe, Mr. Oswald, I've met you before," said Enoch.

"You haven't." Grant Oswald smiled cordially. "Your man tells me you have exactly ten minutes to spare. I'll go straight to business. I'm an Englishman. I have been in New York for three weeks. I want to invest money in something along the theatrical line."

"Oh." Enoch looked up sharply. "Andrew Merry mentioned you."

"Yes, I spoke to Merry one night on the elevated. I had seen him on the stage during former visits to America. He's one of your few American actors whom I admire. I've always had an idea he could do much better in emotional work than in straight comedy."

"He holds that idea himself."

"He's right."

"It's like tempting Providence to make that sort of venture. I've seen actors try it and go to the wall."

"Not one who had Merry's qualifications?"

"Possibly not."

"Don't you agree with me that Merry would make a success in something higher than farce comedy?" asked Oswald eagerly.

"I believe he would."

"If a play could be found that fitted him—he spoke of having one—I'm willing to venture a hundred thousand dollars on its production."

"A hundred thousand! That would be a production worth while!"

"But — remember — only if the play ap-

peals to me. I've been studying theatrical business since I was a youngster. I never threw money away on it. I've had a craze for years to try, but I won't spend a penny until I find the combination of an actor and a play that suits me."

"They are waiting for you now, Mr. Oswald," said Enoch quietly.

"I shall be delighted to find it so."

"If you can stay I will read you the play now."

"My ten minutes are up." The Englishman smiled.

"This work can wait. Excuse me a minute." Wentworth lifted a heap of clippings and copy which littered his table. Then he walked to the safe and knelt before it. He had just opened the door and laid his hand upon the manuscript when the door opened and Dorcas ran in. Jason followed, carrying a suit-case. For a minute Wentworth forgot the visitor in his inner room.

"Bless my heart, I'm glad to have you back," he cried. "Never in all your life have I seen you look so well."

She held him at arm's length and gazed at [80]

him critically. "I wish I could say as much for you, Enoch. You look decidedly seedy. Jason," she turned to the servant, "haven't you been taking good care of your master?"

"As good's he'd 'low me to, Miss Dorry," the old man smiled. "I can't keep him from settin' up nights."

"I've got to stay right here," said Dorcas resolutely. "I'm the only one who can manage him."

"I beg your pardon, Dorcas, I've a guest here." Her brother led her to the inner room and introduced his caller to her.

"Mr. Oswald and I were having a business talk, Dorry—not exactly business either. You may stay if you wish and hear a play. I was just going to read to him. If he likes it he will star Andrew Merry in it."

"Oh!" A glow of anticipation shone in the girl's eyes. She laid her coat and hat on the window seat and dropped into a low chair beside her brother. Once or twice she patted him affectionately on the shoulder. The Englishman watched her. There was vivid admiration in his eyes, but Dorcas did not

see it. Her only thought was of the happiness in store for Merry.

Wentworth laid the pages of manuscript on the table and cleared his throat. Oswald sat ready to bestow a business-like attention upon the reading. When Enoch lifted the first page his visitor asked: "May I know who wrote the play?"

"I did," answered Wentworth quietly.

"Ah!" said the Englishman. He noticed the startled look on Dorcas' face. It escaped her brother, who sat turned half away from her.

Wentworth began to read. He was an excellent reader; his enunciation was slow and distinct. The story quickly unfolded itself in strong, vivid language. Grant Oswald, who was an ardent student of dramatic literature, fell immediately under its spell and listened with intent quiet. It was the first time Wentworth had read the play aloud. When he plunged into its swift action he forgot himself. For an hour he was living the drama of the human lives he unfolded. Throughout ran the motive of supremacy of right over wrong, even if long delayed. He had for-

gotten utterly how he had set his own feet on perilous ground; for the time being he was an actor.

The minds of both men were so vitally concentrated upon the drama that they were scarcely conscious of a movement when Dorcas crept from her low chair to the window seat. She lay back against a pillow, gathered the folds of a silky portière around her, and stared down at the square. The warm color had left her face. A dull roaring pressed upon her ears. She heard her brother's voice in frag-Those fragments were always the ments. words of the girl Cordelia or of the father fallen to pitiful estate. She clasped her hands together with such a grip that it numbed her fingers. A strange pain and a horrible suspicion were seeping through her body and burning in her veins. Outwardly she was inert.

She watched a group of children in the square. Although it was still early September, the leaves were falling. The wind had tossed them into heaps here and there and children went scuffling through them with delighted shouts. The 'busses from Fifth Avenue

wheeled leisurely to their stopping-place in the middle of the square and a procession of vehicles glided past. The everyday life of the city was moving as it had done today and yesterday and under the tread of generations. Dorcas felt as if she had dropped out from the procession and had come face to face with a blank wall. It dragged its unbroken length on and on, there was no gap in it and no corner in sight. A shiver crept through her veins. She stared at the half-naked trees on the square, wondering if anything which is not alive, as humanity is, felt a chill at the approach of winter.

Suddenly she was awake again, wide awake, tingling with life and emotion, listening to her brother's vibrant voice. The day of release had come for John Esterbrook. He stood with halting, tremulous steps, fearful at the sight of the world he had left twenty years before, hiding his eyes from its tumult. Then Cordelia ran to meet him—young, hopeful, loving, and eager. Dorcas forgot the horror and doubt which had swept her down for a moment, she was thinking of nothing but the play. It was greater, more human, than she

had dreamed of that day when Andrew and she walked home over the beach at Juniper Point. Her eyes grew wet with pity, then she smiled happily as life ceased to be a problem for Cordelia. Love had come, and the father turned to work out what was left him of a future.

Enoch laid the manuscript aside. The Englishman, hearty in his congratulations and enthusiastic, was urging the earliest possible production. He offered unlimited money and insisted that the best company New York could produce should be engaged. The spell of the story was still upon Dorcas. She passed out, shaking hands hastily with Oswald.

"Dorry," cried her brother. She did not answer.

"The play stirred her intensely," said Oswald. He had noticed a trace of tears on her cheeks. "Was this the first time she heard it read?"

"Yes, I had never even told her of it. She has been away while — it was written."

"Is your sister an actress?"

"No — she wants to go upon the stage."

"Let her have her way," advised the Englishman. "Her every action shows that she possesses dramatic talent."

"It isn't my idea of her future."

"Stage life is exactly what one chooses to make of it. Curiously enough, I have a conviction she could play Cordelia."

Wentworth brushed his hand across his forehead and stared at the scattered sheets of manuscript on the table.

"Get Merry here as soon as possible. I want a consultation with both of you," suggested Oswald while he drew on his gloves. "It is now only a matter of time and a theater. I have an idea we can get the Gotham shortly. The piece they are to put on there next week simply can't go. It met with a terrible frost in London. If I may advise now, don't choose anyone on this side for Mrs. Esterbrook. I know a woman who can play that part to perfection. Again let me congratulate you. It's a great play, one of the greatest I've heard in years. It's bound to succeed."

Wentworth bowed, but a sudden flush blazed into his face. He was not hardened [86]

enough yet to accept congratulations for the brain product of another man.

"Goodbye," said the Englishman, holding out his hand cordially.

"Goodbye," murmured Wentworth. He moved to the window. A carriage stood waiting in front of the house. He watched Oswald step into it and drive away.

Twilight was closing in. Suddenly the street lights glared crystal white through the gravness. Wentworth stood perfectly silent. A flood of pity for Andrew Merry and a rush of horror-stricken repugnance at his own theft came tearing at him since he had taken the step which was a turning-point. A patrol wagon dashed through the square. Between two blue-coated officers sat a trapped, downcast wretch. The vehicle crossed the street with a trail of curious slum urchins behind it. Wentworth shivered. He wondered if the man had been caught red-handed in murder or — was he merely a thief? He shrugged his shoulders impatiently and turned to the cheerful fire.

Suddenly he recollected that Dorcas had not spoken a single word of praise or congrat-

ulation on the play. She was always enthusiastic and happy over every triumph that came to him. She must have thought well of the play. She had a full appreciation of Merry's talents and she had seemed to like him while they were together during the summer. He paused to pull himself together mentally, then he called her. She came slowly into the room, which had grown dark. There was nothing but a glimmer from the fire to light it. She moved to a corner on the wide sofa and sat down.

"Dorry," said Wentworth slowly, "do you know you have not said yet that you like — my play?"

"Your play?"

"Why, Dorry?"

The girl spoke in an unsteady voice. "I don't believe, Enoch, that Andrew Merry told you of a long talk we had at Juniper Point. You remember you left me alone with him when you were called to Boston. We sat on the rocks one afternoon and he told me his plot for this play — he had been thinking it out for years and years. Why," the girl shook her head impatiently, "why, Enoch, he

had labored on it so long that some of the speeches were written, in his mind. Sometimes he put the story into the very words you read!"

There was utter silence in the room for a minute. Dorcas stared intently through the dusk. She was longing to see her brother's face. She tried to cross the room to touch him, to make him speak, but she could not bring herself to do it. Something mental, not exactly repulsion or dismay, but a force as physical as a restraining hand, held her back.

During these few minutes Enoch Wentworth fought the battle of his life. The knowledge that Merry had confided the story of his play to Dorcas fell upon him like a thunderbolt. Besides, he had discovered the woman who had waked Merry's genius to life. He realized that the actor loved his sister. By certain strange mental processes he had come to accord Merry a place in his thoughts as a slave. He shrank from the thought of this man loving Dorcas, almost as if it had been a question of color. At the same time an impulse to set Merry free began to rage in

his heart. He longed to liberate himself, to become again an honest man.

Difficult, dangerous moments, anxious moments had come into Enoch's life, but none so crucial as this. It was the struggle between good and evil. which every human being harbors to a greater or lesser degree, in one soul, in one body. Wentworth sighed. battle had passed and evil had won. It was prepared to carry him through the most dangerous moment. With it came fresh valor, and not only the power to sin further, but a mysterious weakening of the moral tissues which made it possible for him to sin coolly and remorselessly. He turned on the light and with cool composure faced his sister. He met her gray eyes without a quiver. They asked a question which could not be evaded.

"I hate to tell you, Dorcas," there was a tone of reluctance in Wentworth's voice, "but Merry is down again, down in the gutter."

The girl jumped to her feet. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "Besides, if he were, what has that to do with his play?"

Enoch did not answer. Instead he asked a [90]

question. "Dorcas, do you care for — do you love — Andrew Merry?"

A flush blazed into the girl's face. In spite of the telltale color her brother believed her.

"Yes, I care for Andrew Merry — very much. I do not love him."

Enoch gazed at her wistfully. He knew, as she did not, how easy it is to cross the bridge which carries a woman from mere friendship to love.

"Why did you ask me that?"

"I wanted to find out how much it would hurt if I told you the truth. Merry is not worth your love, he is not even worth your friendship."

"It is not true!" There was indignant protest in the woman's voice. "I know better, so do you. Only this does not explain about his play, for it is his play."

"You remember he left Juniper Point suddenly?"

"Yes." She raised her head with an eager gesture. "He went away to write this play." She pointed to the manuscript which lay on the table.

"Yes," said Enoch slowly. "He began bravely enough. Then — he went under, as he had done so many times in his life."

"What was it?" cried the girl. "Drink or gambling?"

Enoch lay back in his chair. He began to marvel at how easily he could lie, because a lie had never come readily to him before.

"Drink and gambling — and everything." Her brother shrugged his shoulders as if in disgust. "Of course he stopped writing. A man could not write in his condition. He sent for me."

"I thought you had no idea of where he had gone. You didn't know when I went to Baltimore."

"I could not bring him here while you were in the house and straighten him out as I had done before. Anyway, he would not come. He was hot to have the play finished, maudlin as he was. I stayed by him night and day and — wrote. You see — I wrote it." He lifted a written sheet from the loose pile of manuscript.

"Perhaps — but it is not *your* play." Dorcas shook her head with obstinate incredulity.

"I told him so. I suggested we make it a collaborated play."

"It is not even a collaborated play, Enoch. Why, every situation, the plot, even the very words, are his."

"He wants me to father it."

"He must have changed since he said goodbye to me. He was on fire then with hope and ambition."

"He has changed," acceded Enoch gravely. It was a relief to make one truthful statement.

"Is he to play 'John Esterbrook' when it is produced?"

"No other actor can. Merry has the entire conception of it now."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you promised Mr. Oswald to have him here and get things started for an early production?"

"I did. I am hoping to find Merry at one of his haunts. He must be found and put on his feet. There's a tremendous lot at stake. Dorry," he turned to her appealingly, "won't you help me?"

"I'll help you," Dorcas spoke slowly, "if you can assure me of one thing."

"What?"

"That there is no wrong to be done."

"There is no wrong to be done. Merry will have the opportunity of his life, if he can only be made to see it that way."

"And there is no wrong to be righted?"

"There is no wrong to be righted."

"Then he must be found. When he is found," the girl spoke decisively, "he must appear before the world as the author of his play."

"He won't do it," answered Wentworth.

He rose, put on his hat, and went out. Dorcas heard the front door slam behind him, then she laid her face on the arm of the sofa and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII. THE QUESTION OF HONOR

GUESS he's as freakish as they make them," said Phillips, the city editor on the *Herald*. "The profession's a blow hot, blow cold bunch anyway."

Wentworth sat by his desk sketching a string of absurd drawings on the blotter. Phillips stared at him eagerly. "You can't give me any sort of tip as to where Merry's gone?" he asked.

Wentworth looked at him with a straightforward gaze. "I don't know any more what Merry's up to, or where he is, than you do. The last time I saw him was in my library two weeks ago. I'm as anxious to find him as you are."

"Berg's crazy. He announced Merry for the star part in 'A Left-over Bachelor.' Their paper's in the works. They've called rehearsals for Monday. The company's all here but the star; he can't be found. He wrote to Berg three weeks ago and threw up the part. Berg threatened him with a law-

suit. It's the last word heard of him. Merry's thrown over parts before, then come tumbling back into them, so Berg feels sure it's a bluff. Only, as I said, Merry is so damned skittish that managers are beginning to fight shy of him. He's broken contracts and dropped out in the middle of a run; it's enough to give the best of them nervous prostration. You must allow that he has fits of suspended animation, even if he is a friend of yours."

Wentworth looked keenly at Phillips. "Why do they hang on to him?" he asked.

"They hang on to him simply because he's so blamed different and clever and queer and taking. There isn't a star in New York with such a personal following. The man's whimsical nature appeals to you across the footlights. I've felt it time and again, blasé old cuss that I am. It's pure magnetism, and not one actor in a thousand has magnetism. Merry is soaked with it."

"Does Berg want to make advertising out of his disappearance? The papers haven't had a word about it yet."

"No; he's too anxious to find him. He's set two detectives on the trail. If they don't

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

land him before tomorrow night the evening edition will be out with big scare heads. The papers know they're hunting him."

"What have they discovered?" Enoch's tone was nonchalant.

"Nothing. He left his lodging in Harlem two weeks ago, 'dressed up,' so his landlady says, 'to beat the band.' It's devilish queer. All of a sudden he blossoms out as a dandy, has his clothes pressed, gets new togs, collars and ties and gloves — was blamed finicky about them too, so the clerk told me. About three o'clock that afternoon he went into a florist's and got a boutonnière of white hyacinths."

"You've been on the trail yourself?"

"I have," answered Phillips. "I sent Ward at first; but he didn't do a thing, so I took it up."

Wentworth reached to a peg for his hat, and slammed the lid down over his desk.

"Going out?" asked Phillips.

"I guess I'll go to Merry's quarters in Harlem. I'm as anxious to locate him as you are."

"May I go with you?" cried the city man eagerly.

"Come along."

"You won't get anything out of his landlady," observed Phillips while they stood on the L platform waiting for an uptown train. "Merry paid his rent a month ahead. She won't let a soul enter his room. He boarded with her before and has gone off like this more than once. She's devoted to him."

"I'll try," answered Enoch shortly.

Merry's lodgings were on the third floor of a tawdry Harlem block. The street looked like hundreds in that vicinity, with its pressing and cleaning shops, its little markets, and tiresome repetition of delicatessen stores. The door was opened by an old woman. She had a shining, good-natured face, a broad bosom, and a stalwart body. Wentworth held out his hand.

"You haven't forgotten me, Mrs. Biller-well?"

"Lord's sake! if 'tain't Mr. Wentworth!" she cried. "I asked Merry about you the first night he come here. Why, its years and years since I seed you."

"Yes, years and years. I boarded with Mrs. Billerwell long ago," Wentworth ex-

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

plained, turning to Phillips. "Mother Billerwell we called her in those days."

"Yes, sir, an' it was heaps o' motherin' the crowd o' you took, especially Merry. Glory be! he's a case still!"

"It's Merry's room I want to look into, Mother Billerwell," he said. "We're growing anxious about him. He's wanted on business."

"Don't git to worryin' about him," cried the old woman. "You know his easy-goin' ways. Here today, off tomorrow; I reckon he's holidayin' some place. He'd ought to holiday. He'd been workin' week in an' week out, writin' an' actin'. He set to spoutin' his speeches and walkin' the floor nights! I had to quiet him down. The boarders got scared, an' thought he was crazy."

"Let us go to his room," said Wentworth.
"We've got to find him quick. He'll lose money if he doesn't show up soon."

"I'll let you in." They followed Mrs. Billerwell up the stair. She looked back at them from a landing. "I've had six or eight fellers, newspaper fellers I guess, pleadin' to get in. Your friend here was one o' them. He can go in now — seein' he's with you."

She unlocked a door and ushered them into a small, frayed-looking room. There were crude pictures on the walls. Coarse lace curtains hung at the windows and gaudy ornaments loaded the mantel. Nothing betokened Merry's recent residence there except a few toilet articles on the bureau and a pad of blotting paper pinned to a narrow table with thumb tacks. The top sheet was an illegible tangle of red and black ink.

"He must have done a lot of writing lately," observed Phillips. "I guess he doctored up his part. Berg told him to do anything he wanted with it. He was wise. Give Merry a chance and he can make any role fit him like a glove. He's—"

"You'll have to excuse me," interrupted Mrs. Billerwell. "I've a new girl in the kitchen and —"

"Yes, I understand," said Wentworth.
"I'll call you before we go. We'll stay only a few minutes."

When she shut the door behind her Phillips pulled out the drawer of the writing table.

"Excuse me, Phillips," Wentworth laid a restraining hand on the man's arm; "let me [100]

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

do the searching. It isn't quite a nice thing for the fellow who's gone, and I fancy Merry would rather I did it than you."

"Go ahead," cried the city man cheerfully. "You'll give me any tip, though, if you find it?"

"I will." Enoch's voice was churlish.

Phillips stretched himself in a chair and watched Wentworth as he lifted several sheets of paper from the drawer and glanced them over. They held nothing but a few lines at the top of each page, such as an author discards when writing at white heat. Enoch thrust them back hurriedly.

"Nothing on these," he said, "except lines of his part."

"Queer he should have labored so after he gave it up," observed Phillips. "Berg's right. His theory is that Merry never had any idea of giving it up; his resignation was a whim."

"I guess so." Enoch spoke carelessly. "There isn't a blessed thing here to give a clue to his whereabouts. There are no letters—it's like pulling teeth to make Andrew answer even a business note; consequently he had no correspondence to speak of."

Wentworth turned to the top drawer of the bureau. It held a grotesque jumble of theater programs, telegrams, circulars, and magazines mixed with shirts, clean or soiled, and other articles of a man's wardrobe. In a smaller drawer lay a few new collars, ties, and cuffs.

"Great Scott, what an untidy chap he is," said Phillips. "You don't suppose," he paused for a second meditatively, "you don't suppose, Wentworth, all this sprucing up — it's so new for him, you see — you don't suppose there's a woman in the affair?"

"No," answered Wentworth decisively; "there has never been a woman in Andrew Merry's life."

"She may have arrived now. He mightn't have taken you into his confidence."

Enoch shook his head scornfully while he lifted the lid of Merry's trunk. It held more rumpled clothes, typewritten sheets of parts he had played, and a strange miscellany of stuff. In one tray was a package of letters with a rubber band about it. Phillips peered eagerly over Wentworth's shoulder when he picked it up. He laid it back immediately, unopened.

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

"Why don't you look them over?" asked the newspaper man impatiently.

"They're letters from his mother. She's been dead for years."

"Oh!" exclaimed Phillips, "it's queer. You'd think he would have left a clue of some sort."

"You wouldn't think it queer if you knew Merry." Enoch dropped the lid of the trunk, walked to the window, and stared down into a dim court. Suddenly he wheeled about.

"Phillips, I've an idea. Go to the nearest 'phone, call my number. Jason, my darky, will probably answer. Ask him to look in the address book in a pigeonhole at the left of my desk for the address of Colonel John Ewing. Explain to him it's under E.; Jason is no great scholar, he may keep you waiting a minute or two before he finds it. I'll take another look around here before you come back."

Phillips was out of the room in a minute. Wentworth smiled derisively; it had been almost too easy to get rid of the man. He shut the door and hurried across the room to lift an oval shaving mirror from the dresser. He adjusted it deftly above the sheet of

blotting paper on Merry's table, turning it at certain angles and peering into the glass attentively. He moved it over the whole blotter. There was not a legible line on the blurred surface and scarcely a legible word. He lifted the thumb tacks to examine the sheets underneath. Here and there the silvery disk of the mirror reflected entire pages of writing. Merry must have worked with the speed of a steam engine. The ink had scarcely dried at the top of a page before it was ready to blot. Towards the end, when his energy was at white heat, he had not stopped for a clean blotter; the blurred surface was evidence of that.

Enoch detached carefully three sheets which clearly reflected pages of the play, lifted them out, and put the top blotter back in place. He searched among the littered paper in the table drawer and laid aside every sheet on which even a few lines were scrawled. With a large pair of shears he began to cut each blotter into strips, then gathered them together, adding the sheets of paper. He did them up in a neat package, slipped a rubber band over it, and dropped it in his overcoat

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

pocket. Then he sat down beside the table. His head was bent between his hands and he began to study the smudged blotter again with the aid of the mirror. He fancied he had found one legible line when the door opened softly. He glanced up. Merry stood staring at him. His face was unshaven, he looked jaded and shabby.

As Wentworth jumped to his feet Andrew looked at him with a contemptuous smile.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit?" he asked.

"I came to see if I could get any idea where you had gone. Berg wants you; so do I."

"And you failed to find a clue to my whereabouts or any trace of my work?" Andrew laughed sneeringly.

Wentworth looked uneasy. He heard footsteps in the hall. Phillips began to speak before he was fairly in the room. "Colonel Ewing's address is—the devil!" he ejaculated, staring from one man to the other.

Merry laughed again, derisively this time. "So, two of you came to accept my modest hospitality?"

Phillips flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I can assure you, Mr. Merry, we did not disturb anything."

"Hell!" cried Merry, turning his back upon the man.

"Mr. Berg planned to give the story of your throwing up your part and your disappearance to the papers tomorrow. I was—"

Merry straightened himself to his full slender height and looked down at Phillips. "Take a message from me to Berg — now, if you wish. Tell him I'll be on hand tomorrow morning to rehearse the part of 'Professor Phimister.'"

Phillips tossed his hat on his head and turned to leave the room.

"Wait a minute." Wentworth spoke with slow deliberation. "Tell Berg that Merry's contract is broken. He will not play 'The Professor.'"

Andrew rushed at him in an impetuous fury. "When did I give you permission to manage my affairs? Tell Berg," he turned a flushed face upon the bewildered Phillips, "give him my message and say —"

"Tell Berg I will come to his office within two hours," interrupted Wentworth.

THE QUESTION OF HONOR

Merry's face blazed furiously red. Before he could speak Enoch had pushed Phillips from the room and locked the door.

"Sit down," he commanded. "You seem to have forgotten, Andrew, that I am your manager and your proprietor."

Merry seated himself on the table.

"Excuse me." Andrew stared malignantly for a moment at the man who had once been his friend, then he laughed bitterly. "Excuse me; it is hard for a free-born American to become accustomed at once to the fact that he is merely goods and chattels."

"I have not put you in that category yet."

"No, and by God, you won't!" When Merry jumped to his feet he changed in an instant to a ruthless savage. "I'm going to see what the law can do to protect a man from the most infernal villain that ever —"

"The law will restore the play to you — at once, but I want you to search your memory. Go back to the half-hour after that last poker hand." Enoch spoke with slow deliberation while he laid a sheet of paper on the table.

Merry glanced down reluctantly. It was the bond.

"You asked me — if you recollect," continued Wentworth quietly, ""Will this hold good in law?" I answered, 'It will hold good just so long as the loser is a man of honor, no longer."

"Honor!" The thrill of cold contempt in Merry's voice made Wentworth wince. The men sat staring at each other in silence. Enoch spoke first.

"Andrew, supposing the four spot had fallen to you. What would you have done with me?"

Several minutes passed before Merry answered. "God knows. Until temptation steps in a man knows nothing of the bottom-less pit in the human soul."

CHAPTER VIII. MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

UDDENLY, as if the earth had swallowed him, Merry disappeared again. An hour after Wentworth left the Harlem boarding-house the actor had gone, taking a few belongings with him in a valise. The tears came into Mrs. Billerwell's eyes as she spoke of their goodbye, but she could not offer the faintest clue to his whereabouts.

A week passed. Grant Oswald, in a fever of enthusiasm, had begun preparations for a Broadway production. He turned a vast amount of responsibility over to Wentworth, who shouldered it thankfully. It kept at arm's length the possibility of dwelling much with his own thoughts: they were not cheerful company, and he was racked by constant anxiety about Merry. There was not a single moment to spare when he could go into the highways and byways of a great city to search, as he had searched before when the

man was his friend. He could not delegate the task to another. He had prepared a tale for the public of Merry's whereabouts. Oswald believed the actor was studying his part and stood ready to appear at a moment's notice. Enoch went ahead with the tremendous load of detail that fell upon him, toiling day and night, while his mind alternated between terror and hope.

His newspaper career had been crowded full of action. Frequently he had felt that he had touched the crisis of his life. Sometimes that crisis had come during a startling dénouement in detective work. He had watched the fury and carnage of battle as a war correspondent, and rare diplomacy had been demanded of him in more than one difficult political situation. Such experiences had required rare acumen, a keen knowledge of human nature, bravery, and tact. These were essential now, but something more.

Every day the man was acquiring traits new to his nature. When a strange accident had tossed before him the possibility of satisfying his dearest ambition, conscience entreated loudly against the theft of another man's life-

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

work. Every noble instinct in Enoch made its appeal; his honesty, his generosity, an innate demand for fair play, the love of his sister and friend, all cried aloud to him during the lonely hours of the night. There had been moments when he would have gladly retraced his steps, but the die had been cast. He was like a racer who, by some treacherous ruse, had pushed aside an opponent and was close to the goal. The intoxication of applause was beginning to sound in his ears and the future held untold possibilities. It was too late to turn back: it would mean the downfall of great ambitions and bitter shame - it might even mean crime. It seemed easier to take the chances.

Occasionally Andrew's dogged face flashed back to his memory when he cried, "I will see what the law can do to protect a man from theft." Enoch felt his face blanch at the thought of it. Many a man had gone down and out for a crime less knavish than this. But he knew Andrew Merry well, and he trusted to one trait which was predominant in the man — his queer, exaggerated idea of honor.

Day by day his conscience quieted down, self-confidence took the place of wavering, and the fear of exposure seemed to recede. At last he could look the situation in the face without flinching. The task of putting on a theatrical production began to absorb him completely. He had always longed for such a chance: he had been storing away ideas he could now utilize, besides he knew New York thoroughly, and he had observed for years the system of producing a play. Oswald looked on with appreciation as Enoch put his plans into shape. He knew how uncommon was the combination of such talents in the same man — the ability to write a virile play, then to stage it with practical skill and artistic feeling and originality. A remarkably strong company was engaged. Oswald insisted on filling even the smallest parts with people far above the level of subordinate actors. The salary list grew to stupendous figures. One morning Wentworth remonstrated against paying one hundred dollars a week to an actor who was to play the janitor.

"Breen is a far bigger man than you need,"
[112]

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

he objected. "He has played leads to many of the biggest stars. We need a mere bit of character work in this — he isn't on the stage half an hour. I can get a first-rate man for half that price."

"Breen can make the janitor so true to life that the audience will regret seeing him for only half an hour," Oswald rejoined. "That's the test of quality. When I pay a hundred dollars I want a hundred-dollar man."

Before the middle of October all the parts were in rehearsal except two. An Englishwoman, Zilla Paget, was crossing the Atlantic to play "Mrs. Esterbrook." Oswald refused obstinately to give "Cordelia" to any actress that Wentworth suggested.

"We must close with somebody mighty quick," said Enoch, when Oswald had turned down Katherine Dean.

"Miss Dean is not even to be thought of," answered the Englishman decisively. "She's beautiful, but where's her feeling, her intelligence? I sat watching her face — the light fell strong upon her while you talked. There's absolutely nothing to her but beauty."

"She can act," insisted Wentworth.

"I've seen her act. It isn't acting we want in 'Cordelia.' The woman who plays 'Cordelia' must have feeling, tender, compassionate understanding, dignity, and breeding. She must be gentle-voiced, with a young face not a face into which youth is painted."

"'Cordelia' must have beauty."

"We may get both. I am not searching for 'Cordelia' among the stars; I have hopes of finding her among the unknowns."

"That's a risky proposition," said Wentworth impatiently. "'Cordelia' is a big part. Why, it's almost leading business—it ought to be in rehearsal now."

"Wait a few days," suggested Oswald. "Now, tell me, when is Merry to show up? He should have been here a week ago. Can't you wire him today?"

"I'll do it right away." Wentworth tossed his hat on his head and left the office. He drew a long breath, when he stepped out on the sidewalk, and looked anxiously up and down Broadway as if hoping to see Merry approach with his nonchalant stride. He paused for a moment to light a cigar, then started at a brisk gait down the street. He

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

was accosted here and there by a friend. Each one offered congratulations. He was in no mood for that sort of thing. A block further ahead he saw Phillips of the *Herald* in the moving throng. There would be no escaping him. He jumped on a down-town car, and a few minutes later he was at the Battery. He stepped off and crossed the square. The tide was coming in and a stiff breeze blew off the ocean.

He seated himself on a bench and watched the spray dash over the pier. Throngs came and went, but Enoch did not see them. His mind was centered desperately upon one anxiety: Merry must be found. He had felt so certain that the actor might appear at any moment that he had allowed Oswald to think he knew where he was. He reported him half-sick, trying to recuperate, and hating the worry of a lawsuit with an angry manager, which Oswald was trying to settle out of court. He assured him that the comedian was letter perfect in his part; all he needed was to appear at late rehearsals. The strain, however, was telling on Wentworth. He had grown nervous and irritable. Oswald saw

traces of it, but laid it to anxiety over the preparations for his play.

Dorcas realized the change in her brother and felt it keenly. She contrasted the carefree, generous, gay Enoch as he had been a month ago, with the man who had aged suddenly, who was growing morose, fretful, uncommunicative, and impatient over trifles. Day after day she saw less of him. His plea was hard work, so the girl was left to her own devices. She had few friends in the city. She spent the fall days in long, solitary walks, and her mind dwelt constantly on Merry. Her brother scarcely mentioned the play to She read news of it in the papers. Through them came the information that Enoch had relinquished journalism and was working on the production of a new play by a new author. She drew a long breath of relief over that announcement. She felt sure Enoch would do full justice to Merry when the time arrived. She was too proud to ask questions. Her brother had always taken her completely into his confidence; she was certain he would do so again when the toil and worry were over.

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

Wentworth watched her closely. He realized how she felt his reticence and change of feeling; her every glance told it. He wondered frequently what the thoughts were that she did not put into words. In every woman he had admired for beauty, intellectual or heart qualities there had been imperfections which were temperamentally feminine. Dorcas was different. Sometimes he fancied it might be caused by her seclusion from the world during girllood. Then he remembered a few of her girl friends he had met. In each of them he had seen some petty deceit or frivolity which, manlike, he accounted a typical feminine vice. Dorcas was different in heart and intellect. She resembled stalwart men he had known.

He sat with his eyes fixed on an ocean steamer moving majestically up the harbor. When her whistle shrieked in response to a salute, Wentworth rose with a start and glanced sharply about him. He felt that some one was watching him. His eyes met the gaze of his sister. She sat on a nearby bench staring at him, a newspaper in her lap and her hands clasped listlessly over it.

"Why, Dorry! How long have you been here? Did you call me?"

"I did not speak to you," she answered quietly. "When I laid down my paper a minute ago you sat there."

He did not offer to take a place beside her, though she moved to make room for him. His face flushed hotly when his glance fell on the headlines of a paper that lay in Dorcas' lap.

"Have you seen the story about yourself in the *Times*?"

"Of course I have," answered Enoch impatiently. "It was not my doing. Oswald insisted on it. Every paper is clamoring for news. We produce the play the first week of December."

"The paper speaks of you alone. Merry isn't given credit for even suggesting the plot. His name is not mentioned."

Wentworth's brow wrinkled into an ugly scowl. "How could he be mentioned? He can't be found — anywhere."

"Mr. Oswald said yesterday he was in the Catskills, ready to come on at a moment's notice."

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

"I wish to God he were!" cried Wentworth desperately.

"Why don't you tell Mr. Oswald the truth?"

"Dorcas, vou're a child. You don't understand that I am up against a harder proposition than I can meet."

"It seems to me, Enoch," said the girl slowly, "if you had not —"

She did not finish the sentence. She turned her eves away from her brother and stared at the multitude of craft in the Bay, jostling each other as vehicles do on Broadway.

"Had not what?" he insisted.

She met his eyes calmly and they wavered before her own. "I mean if you had not made a false start — if you had gone into this honestly - everything would have come out happily."

Wentworth did not answer.

"I can't feel, Enoch, that Merry has had fair play."

The man stamped his foot impatiently.

"Help me to find him, then. Things will straighten out if he puts in an appearance.

Come, let us walk home. It's too chilly for you to sit here."

Dorcas rose and folded the paper which lay on her lap. She kept up with her brother's long strides through the crowd that thronged Broadway. After a few minutes' silence he asked suddenly: "How did you happen to see Mr. Oswald yesterday?"

"He called at the house."

"About what?"

"On business. He has asked me to play 'Cordelia.'"

"It might have occurred to him to consult me!"

Wentworth stopped for a second. Dorcas was not looking at him—her eyes were turned straight ahead on the bustling street.

"Why didn't he speak to me first?" he persisted.

"I don't know. I can't decide what to do. I would say 'yes' if I could talk it over with Andrew Merry."

"I have told you point-blank you are not to go on the stage."

"You know how I feel about it." Dorcas
[120]

MERRY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

spoke quietly. "You remember, I told you it was the only work I ever cared to do."

"When did Oswald suggest this?"

"Several weeks ago. He has talked with me about it more than once."

"He might have taken me into his confidence." snarled Wentworth.

"He knew how you felt about it. Besides, Enoch," the girl's voice trembled, "besides—lately I have not known whether you cared anything about my affairs."

Wentworth did not answer until they turned into the quieter region of Waverly Place.

"Don't sit in judgment on me, Dorry," he pleaded. "When the trolley gets swung back on its pole and things begin to run without constant switching, I'll return to the old routine. Have a little faith in me. I have nobody in the world except you."

Dorcas flung away the paper which she was carrying and tucked one hand into her brother's arm.

"It's a bargain?" he asked, looking down at her with a smile.

"It's a bargain," she answered.

"About 'Cordelia,' Dorry, do as you please.

I cut loose when Father planned my future, and did what I wanted to. A girl, I suppose, has the same rights, especially if she's a girl who can be trusted — implicitly."

When he unlocked the door, Dorcas passed in before him. As he shut it behind him she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. Wentworth held her for a moment in a close, affectionate grasp. On the hall table lay a note addressed to Dorcas, also a telegram for Wentworth. He tore it open and stood for a minute deep in thought.

"Enoch, I have an invitation here from Mr. Oswald to see Nazimova tonight. Do you mind if I go?"

"No. Give Oswald a message from me. I sha'n't have time to see him before I leave."

"Leave for where?"

"For Montreal. I put a detective on Merry's track. He has almost laid his hand on him. Tell Oswald I will bring Merry back with me in two days at the latest."

"Oh!" cried Dorcas radiantly, "then everything will be righted!"

"Everything will be righted," repeated her brother.

CHAPTER IX. THE BREAD LINE

ISS WENTWORTH, what does 'Hilda' in 'The Master Builder' mean to you?" asked Grant Oswald during the first lull of quiet they met after leaving the theater. Their cab had been held up in a Broadway blockade and the street became suddenly still. "She means something. Ibsen, first, last, and all the time, deals in parables. Six people whom I know, intelligent people, have six different interpretations of 'Hilda.' I am curious to know what she stands for to you."

Dorcas turned her candid gray eyes to his.

"I see only one thing—conscience. She appears when the 'Master Builder,' by one cruel, unjust, selfish action, is bound to go down to the depths. Nothing can save him but his conscience. 'Hilda' is his conscience, of course."

"That is my interpretation exactly. It is a wonderful play!"

"It is a wonderful play." She pointed to [123]

a crowd on the sidewalk. "What is that string of men?" she asked. Their cab had been moving step by step for half a block. Again it came to a standstill.

"It's the bread line. Had you never seen it before?"

"No. Who are the men?"

"God knows!" answered the Englishman, with a thrill of compassion in his voice. "They are a lot of half-frozen, starving, human wreckage, who have been waiting there for an hour to get a loaf of bread."

Dorcas lowered the carriage window and gazed out. Oswald watched her. The girl's face mirrored her feelings so keenly he could feel what was passing in her mind. Her lips quivered and tears hung on her lashes. She could not trust herself to speak.

"I shall never forget how that pitiful line appealed to me the first time I saw it," the man continued, "although I had known the poor of London since boyhood. This homeless, famished, orderly column, growing and growing as one man after another comes creeping from his burrow to hold a place, was too much for me. I stood watching it

THE BREAD LINE

from that corner," he pointed across the street, "night after night. I used to try to help. In a few cases I did manage to put a man on his feet. The task was generally hopeless, except that I could satisfy the hunger of the moment. During hard winters in New York I have seen the line grow till there were hundreds in it. Sometimes it goes down Tenth Street and around the corner."

Dorcas turned to look at him. Tears stood in her eyes and her lips quivered.

"I understand," he went on. "You are wondering why we, well-clothed, fed, and sheltered from the wind, are here, and they are—there. I do not know. It is a problem as old as the world itself. All we can do is to help individually, man to man."

Dorcas' gaze went back to the bread line. Oswald sat in thoughtful silence.

"Don't think me sacrilegious, Mr. Oswald," she confessed, "but when I see such misery it makes me wonder if the Eternal himself has a conscience." She sat watching the line of patient, pallid men. Stragglers crept up to join it from every direction. "I simply

cannot imagine a God who — Mr. Oswald!" She grasped his arm with a half-stifled scream and laid her trembling hand upon his.

"What is it?" asked her companion, rising. "What frightened you, Miss Wentworth?" He stared past her out into the street. The block of vehicles had begun to move. They were again driving slowly down Broadway.

"Nothing," she answered quickly, "nothing but a chance resemblance. I thought I — saw some one whom I once knew. It must have been a mistake."

The Englishman glanced at her curiously. She began to chat about the play and other things. She was trying to forget whatever had startled her. She said "Goodbye" at the door of her home. Oswald realized that she was eager to have him go. As he drove away he tried to recall anything which could have happened. A woman of her poise would not be disturbed by a trifle.

Dorcas shut the street door and ran upstairs to her brother's study, where the 'phone stood. She searched distractedly through the directory for the address of a livery from which occasionally she called a cab. The

THE BREAD LINE

name had escaped her. She stood for a moment trying in vain to recall it, then she rang the bell. Her wait seemed endless before the old servant appeared.

"Jason," she cried impatiently, "who is Mr. Wentworth's livery man?"

"Costello, Missy."

"Stay here a minute," she said as she paused for Central's answer. Then she stooped to the 'phone.

"Send a cab, please, to 26 Waverly Place immediately."

She turned again to the old servant.

"Jason," she asked, "you have waited on Mr. Merry when Enoch brought him here sick—haven't you?"

"'Deed I has, Missy. Many's de time Marse Enoch en I's done all sorts ob waitin' on him, when he's done been sick, puffectly missuble, Missy. Yo'-all don't know how missuble."

"Can you help tonight? I may bring Mr. Merry back with me—miserable."

"'Deed I can," cried the old man, with eager sympathy. "Yo' des leeb him to me. Lawdy! I t'ink ez much ob Marse [127]

Andrew mos' as I do ob yo'-all. He's been mighty good to me."

"Thank you," said Dorcas gratefully. "I am not sure whether he will come, but in case he does, be ready for him. He may want a hot bath and supper. Have a cheerful fire; it is bitterly cold outdoors."

She turned and ran downstairs when she heard the rattle of wheels on the street below.

"Don' yo' want me to go wid yo', Missy?" suggested Jason. "Hit's powerfu' late fo' a lady to be goin' roun' New York alone."

"No; I would rather have you here waiting for our return."

"Tenth and Broadway," she directed, as the cabman shut the door. He pulled up at her signal opposite the bakery. The place was closed, the bread line had dispersed, and the quiet of early morning had begun to creep over the street. Occasionally a cab dashed past or a trolley went on its clamorous way, but there were few stragglers to be seen. Here and there a man on foot walked briskly, as if a shelter waited him somewhere. On the sidewalk stood a tall policeman.

THE BREAD LINE

Dorcas studied his face for a moment, then she beckoned him. He came instantly to the cab window.

"Is this your beat every night?"

"Every night this week," said the man in blue.

"The men in the bread line have dispersed. Do you know where they go?"

"Where they go, lady?" The policeman smiled. "I couldn't tell you no more where they go than if they were rabbits scurrying to their holes."

Dorcas shivered. "Are they absolutely homeless — on such a night as this?"

"A good share of them are." The man spoke with little interest. The misery in the streets of New York was an old story to him.

"Do the same men come to the line night after night?"

"A man has to be mighty hungry when he stands an hour or two waiting for a hunk of bread. If his luck turns he drops out. Still, I've seen the same faces there every night for a month. Are you a settlement lady?" he asked respectfully.

"No." The girl's face flushed. "I thought

tonight when we were passing that I saw some one in the bread line I knew, somebody we can't find."

"That happens many a time."

"Do you think," Dorcas asked eagerly, "there would be any chance of his being here tomorrow night?"

"The likeliest chance in the world. If a man's wolfish with hunger — and you'd think some of them were wolfish the way they eat — there's a heap of comfort in even a mouthful of bread and a cup of coffee."

"If I should come tomorrow night —"

"I'll give you any help you want," said the officer kindly, as Dorcas hesitated.

"I don't believe I'll want help. The only thing is — I wish to do it as quietly as possible. It is altogether a family affair."

"I understand. You'll find me here."

"Thank you. Goodnight," said Dorcas gratefully.

"I didn't bring Mr. Merry tonight, Jason," she said, when the old servant opened the door for her; "but tomorrow night I think he will come."

The following day seemed to Dorcas the [130]

THE BREAD LINE

longest she had ever lived through. The weather was crisp and cold. She went for a long walk, treading for the first time a tangle of streets in the vicinity of the docks. It was a part of the city which belongs to the very poor. She searched everywhere for one figure. Poverty, famine, and hopelessness seemed to create a family resemblance among men, women, and children. Still — she found nowhere the man for whom she looked. she reached home at noon she felt tired physically and mentally. She had spent an almost sleepless night. As she dropped off in a drowse she dreamed of finding Merry. of bringing him back to the world where he belonged, of setting his face towards fame, happiness, and an honorable life.

Not a thought of love — the love of a woman for a man — stirred in her heart. She had forgotten her brother's question. There was something singularly childlike about Merry. With his magnetism was blended a strange dash of childish dependence which a few men never lose. It had appealed to the maternal instinct in Dorcas the first time they met.

From morning till night she waited anxiously for news from her brother, but none came. She realized that he was on the wrong clue, but he had left no address, and Dorcas could merely wait. After her walk she lav down to rest on the library couch. A few minutes later she was sleeping peacefully as a child. When Jason came in he closed the shutters noiselessly and covered her with an afghan. The city lights were ablaze when she woke. She waited impatiently for the hours to pass. The policeman had told her it was of no use to come to his corner until eleven or later; it was past midnight when the bread was dispensed. The clock struck eleven when a carriage Dorcas had ordered stopped at the door. Jason hovered anxiously about her.

"You mus' put on yo' big fur coat, Missy, please." He was trying constantly to manage her as he had done when she was a little girl.

"Jason, I don't need it; I am perfectly warm."

"Yo' do, sure ez yo' breathin', Missy," he pleaded anxiously. "Hit's grown bitter

THE BREAD LINE

col' fo' November. Yo'-all 'll freeze ef yo' don'."

"All right," laughed the girl, and she slipped her arms into the wide sleeves. "Just to please you, Jason—remember that—not because I'm cold. Now," she added, "don't get nervous if it is an hour or two before I return. I shall be quite safe. Mr. Merry will come back with me tonight, I know. Have everything as cozy and cheerful as possible. And — Jason — I've got my key. I'll ring when I want you. Don't bother about opening the door." The girl's intuition told her that Merry might have fallen to such low estate that it would hurt for even the old servant to see him. The negro understood.

"I know, Missy, I'll do des ez yo' say—but fo' de Lawd's sake do take care ob yo'se'f. What could I say to Marse Enoch if anyt'ing happened to Missy?"

"Nothing's going to happen, good old Jason," cried the girl, as she ran down the steps.

The officer was waiting at the corner. He beckoned the cabman to pull up where an [133]

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH electric light would not shine into the carriage, then he stopped for a minute at the

window.

"I'll stay near by and keep my eye on you. When you see your party, signal me. I'll give your cabby the order, and he can drive around a block or two and take you up Tenth Street. Then slip out and get your — your — friend that way. There ain't no chance of him seeing you come up behind, as he would if you crossed the street."

"Has the bread line begun to gather yet?" she asked.

"Hardly, ma'am. There's a few stragglers hangin' round. Them that come first get the first chance, of course, only it's a nasty night to wait outdoors with an empty stomach."

Dorcas glanced at the handful of men cowering in a shadowed corner. A sudden fear seized her, the feminine terror of midnight streets.

"You don't imagine," she whispered, "that I shall have any trouble? It is possible I am making a mistake in the man. Are there dangerous characters among them?"

THE BREAD LINE

"Not exactly dangerous," said the officer slowly. "If they're dangerous it's from hunger. It ain't once a year you find a crook in the bread line. It's too easy to spot them, waiting as they do for an hour or two in that light."

"Thank you," said the girl. She crouched behind a half-drawn curtain in the shadow of the carriage, watching eagerly the gathering of homeless, hungry men. They began to creep toward the bakery from every direction, most of them with a shambling step that told of ill-shod feet or shamed reluctance to beg for food. The skies had been lowering for hours, and just before midnight the first storm of the winter came down. It began with keen, tiny needles of ice, but they stung and froze, for the wind drove them in merciless, piercing flurries. The loitering men crowded together and turned their faces sullenly from each furious cloud of sleet. Hunger was bitter enough without the storm. Dorcas watched through misty eyes. wondered at the still patience of the throng. Below her in a basement a warm red light burned, and through an open door the wind

blew the fragrance of boiling coffee across the street. She saw a man thrust a slim white-faced boy into a shelter between the wall and himself.

"If I were starving I couldn't be patient and courteous," she thought. "The smell of food would madden me. I would batter a door down."

She started suddenly, then for a moment she scarcely breathed. Down Tenth Street. slouched a tall, stooping figure. The man wore a shabby overcoat which covered his body almost to the feet: its collar was turned high about his neck and an old slouch hat shadowed his face. Dorcas could see little between but a bristling beard. The keenest detective searching for Andrew Merry would not have glanced twice at the figure: Dorcas' eyes followed it with grave perplexity. had been startled into recognition the night before when the man pulled the shabby hat down over his face. She caught a glimpse of Merry's long, white, slender fingers and noted an impatient, peculiarly graceful gesture which was characteristic of him. Dorcas had seen it frequently, sometimes when he was on the

THE BREAD LINE

stage, sometimes while he had talked with her.

He paused before facing the glare of Broadway and pulled the hat brim carefully about his face: it might have been for shelter from the stinging blasts of sleet or for better concealment. Then he seemed to gather himself together with energy born of despair. He stepped quickly forward and took his place at the end of the bread line. A hundred men stood between him and the beneficence of food. Others were closing in behind him. Here and there one man turned to speak to another; the man Dorcas was watching stood silent and immovable. He thrust his hands deep in his overcoat pockets, his eyes were fixed on the whitening sidewalk beside him. Dorcas turned to the opposite window and nodded with an eager gesture to the officer. His hand went up. He spoke to the cabman in a low voice.

"Drive round through University Place to Tenth — then up toward Broadway. Pull up half-way down the block."

The man turned his horse and moved down the street.

CHAPTER X. A Man of Honor

ORCAS breathed a sigh of relief when her cab drew up beside the bread line. She had thought during her brief drive around the block of the possibility that the man might leave his place: but there he stood, motionless, with head bent defiantly against the stinging eddies of sleet. She stepped from the carriage and passed swiftly along the sidewalk beside the line of a city's poor. She hesitated for a few seconds when she reached the corner, then she stretched out her hand and laid it on the wet sleeve of the man before her. He turned and stared at her for one dazed moment. He did not speak. Instinctive courtesy reminded him that this was no place for a woman in a midnight storm, and his desire to protect her caused the hunger to be forgotten. He stepped quietly from the sidewalk and without a word moved beside her down the street. The movement caused a score of men to turn with

quick curiosity, but suddenly a cry ran down the line: "The door's open!" Everything else yielded to the march toward food.

Dorcas swiftly led the way to the carriage. When she opened the door and beckoned Merry to enter he hesitated, the blood flushing into his wan face.

"What do you want, Miss Dorcas?" he asked quietly.

"I want to talk with you," answered the girl. "Do get in, please — out of the storm."

Merry handed her in, then followed and shut the door. "I cannot go home with you," he announced stubbornly.

"Enoch is away. He's in Montreal, and there is nobody at home except Jason and me. I have so much to say to you," she cried appealingly. "We can't talk driving through the streets on such a night as this."

Merry stared at her for a minute with dogged obstinacy in his gaze.

"Won't you come?" urged the girl impetuously. Her color deepened and an eager light shone in her eyes. "There is so much I want to say. We shall be quite alone. You can trust Jason. Afterwards you may go away

— if you wish — and I will promise never to attempt to find you. I will try to forget you."

Merry stretched out his hand and touched her arm, leaning forward until his face was close to hers. "Miss Dorcas, don't say that. Since I left you that night on Juniper Point I have lived a lifetime of happiness and horror and remorse. One thing alone has saved me from going over the brink of the precipice, simply one thing." He lifted his eyes to hers. "The one thing," he repeated, "that I could not fling away was the memory that you trusted me, that you believed in me, and were waiting for me to make good."

"I trust you now," cried the girl, her voice breaking into a sob. "I am still waiting for you to make good. Won't you come home with me?"

The cab stopped in front of the Waverly Place home. Merry followed her reluctantly up the steps. She paused for a moment while she adjusted the key in the lock.

"Would you mind seeing Jason?" she asked hesitatingly. "He can help you with dry clothes. He will be as glad to see you as I am."

"Ring for him," answered Merry quietly. "Jason and I are old pals."

Half an hour later Merry walked into the library where Dorcas was waiting for him. It seemed as if the mere reassumption of clean, comfortable clothing, even though hunger still marked him, had given the man fresh valor, new dignity.

He laughed nervously. "It is a rejuvenation, isn't it?" he asked as he glanced at himself in the mirror. "Jason unearthed some duds I once left here."

Jason was an excellent valet, and a hot bath, a shave, and fresh raiment had made a man of Merry. The lock of fair hair which habitually fell over his forehead made him look almost boyish, although his face was pallid and careworn.

"I have eaten nothing since morning," Dorcas said. "I told Jason to serve supper here, on a little table beside the fire, where it is cozy and cheerful."

Merry dropped into a chair. He wondered if the intense enjoyment of the good things of life was pure sensuousness. The odor of hot coffee, the sight of a daintily set table,

the radiance of a coal fire, the glow of redshaded lights, and the storm shut outdoors brought a tingling pleasure which seemed like mere animal gratification. He shivered for a moment as he listened to the storm. He wondered what had made it possible for him to brave homelessness and hunger and squalor. Looking back on it he realized he had borne it as a man lives through pain under the power of an anesthetic. The misery of his mind had dulled the sordid wretchedness of mere existence.

To Merry that supper was a festival, not wholly because it was the satisfying of ravenous appetite, but because it was the crisis of his life. Dorcas sensed that if her own hunger was real, Merry would not feel that she was feeding a famished outcast. Jason beamed upon them in sheer enjoyment when he brought in full dishes and carried away empty ones. Dorcas was light-hearted and gay, as happy as they had been during their first acquaintance at the shore. For a moment, while Merry drank his coffee, the memory of a few horrible weeks intruded on the present.

"Miss Dorcas," he began abruptly. "Why did you —"

She stretched out her hand appealingly.

"Don't bring in whys — now. We are so comfortable. I don't ask for an explanation — I don't want to give any. Can't you see I'm in Happy Valley for a little while? I am so glad to have you here again."

Merry smiled into her eyes. "I'll obey you, bless your gentle heart!"

The girl rose and reached to a shelf behind her for a box of cigars. Merry lit one, lounged back in a cushioned chair, and puffed rings of smoke towards the red fire. They sat in silence after Jason had carried away the dishes. Their quiet was broken when the clock struck one. The man started.

"Miss Dorcas, you wanted me here to talk. I cannot rob you of a night's sleep."

"I am as wide awake as a cricket. I slept all the afternoon."

"First of all," Merry asked gravely, "how did you find me? Scores of men and women passed me day after day, people I have known for years. Not one of them recognized me."

"They were not searching for you."

"You were?"

Dorcas nodded.

"How did you find me?" he persisted.

"Last night on my way home from the theater with Mr. Oswald our cab stopped in a block, and it was opposite where — that line of men stood. I was looking at them when I saw you pull down your hat. When Mr. Oswald left me here I drove back to Tenth Street, but the line had dispersed. I went again tonight — just hoping."

"Who is Mr. Oswald?" asked Merry abruptly.

"Don't you know? Haven't you been reading the papers? Mr. Oswald is the man who is putting on your play."

"My play?" Andrew dropped his halfsmoked cigar on the table.

"Your play," repeated Dorcas in a quiet tone. "They have been searching everywhere for you to play 'John Esterbrook.' Enoch is in Montreal now, looking for you."

Merry laughed harshly.

The girl clasped her hands together. "Mr. [144]

Merry, tell me, are you and Enoch no longer friends?"

Andrew picked up his cigar and puffed it until the red spark revived. Then he laughed again. "We are not exactly friends. Has he told you anything?"

"Yes, he told me—only it seemed so strange, so hard to believe after our talk that day at the Point, that somehow I cannot understand it."

Merry watched her keenly. He was throttling a temptation to tell everything that had come between him and the sunshine of existence. He felt sure of the girl's sympathy, he knew she would understand. He had begun to realize his own dependent nature. First there had been his mother, then for years he had leaned upon Enoch's strength and friendship. When he was left alone, it was outer darkness. Every fiber of his being longed not so much for redress as for understanding and sympathy.

"Miss Dorcas, I will begin at the day when I left you and—" Suddenly he realized he could not tell the story of Enoch's disloyalty to her. "Miss Dorcas, I need your help—terribly."

"I am ready to help you in any way I can," she answered quietly. She knew he was nerving himself to a confession, and she understood what an ordeal it was to the man. She crossed the room and laid a paper before him, pointing to the bold headlines stretched across the top of a page. The words fairly leaped at Merry.

TREMENDOUS SURPRISE ENOCH WENTWORTH THE COMING DRAMATIST

He read on down through the column. Fellow journalists had banded together to give Enoch a royal introduction. Merry's name was not mentioned, though there was frequent reference to a famous star, who had the leading part in consideration. Oswald was referred to as a newcomer in the ranks of New York managers. His lavish production of Wentworth's drama was described in figures approaching prodigality. Merry read it through to the last sentence, then the paper fell to the floor and he buried his face in his hands.

While Dorcas watched, her heart ached for him. It was hard to hold in check the soothing touch she would have given to a woman or to a child.

"Oh!" she said in a piteous whisper, "it was such a mistake."

He did not answer or lift his head from his hands.

"I pleaded with Enoch. I told him it was all wrong, terribly wrong, for him as well as for you; that when you returned he must set things straight. I told him it was not even collaboration; it was wholly and distinctly your play, yours alone —"

"Collaboration?" repeated Merry perplexedly, raising his eyes.

"He told me everything," cried the girl hurriedly. She was trying to save him the full confession of his downfall. She did not wish to listen to it.

"Everything!" repeated Merry incredulously.

"Yes, everything. Oh! if you had come back only two or three days ago things would have been different."

He rose abruptly and crossed to the window.

"Miss Dorcas," he did not turn to look at her, "what was the worst thought you had of me when Enoch told you — what happened?"

The girl paused for a minute before she answered. "I thought you were — weak."

"Weak!" The man repeated the word as if trying to comprehend its meaning.

"You should not have allowed Enoch to stand as the author of your play, no matter what the circumstances were. He is not happy over it today. His nature seems to have changed. He is not easy to live with even. Oh, I wish it had never happened!"

Merry waited in silence.

"Things must come right, even if this lie has been told." She pointed at the paper which lay at her feet. "There is one way. You can play the convict so wonderfully that people must realize that you yourself created the part."

"I shall never play the convict." Merry's voice was slow and resolute.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas, "who can? Why, I thought your heart was set on the character."

"It was - once."

"I cannot understand."

The man did not attempt an explanation.

"Andrew Merry," she hesitated as if searching for words which would not wrong her brother, "did Enoch do you any—any injustice?"

She waited for an answer during an infinitely long silence, so it seemed to her. Then the actor spoke abruptly.

"No. As I look back on it now, I went into it with my eyes open. I simply learned that there is no way to gauge human nature."

Again there was a silence. Dorcas was trying to understand, trying to be loyal to her brother, even while her heart, aching with unspoken sympathy, turned to Merry.

"Why don't you want to play 'John Esterbrook'?" she asked quietly.

"I don't suppose I have a decent reason, except that when I — gave up the play I lost all interest in it. 'John Esterbrook' is no more to me today than 'Silas Bagg.'"

"Oh!" cried the girl aghast. "How you have altered!"

"I have." Merry spoke in a hoarse whisper. He returned to his chair by the fire and [149 \}

bent to warm his fingers by the blaze. There was another long silence. Dorcas was the first to break it.

"Even if it were against your inclinations, would you do something to make some one very happy, some one who believes in you—who cares a great deal for you and about your future?"

Merry spoke gently. "Miss Dorcas, I'm afraid you are mistaken. There is nobody in the world to care."

She rose to her feet and, leaning on the mantel, glanced down at him with eyes from which embarrassment had suddenly fled.

"One person — cares very much. I do. I have set my heart on your success. You have a great future — won't you work for it? Besides, I am selfish." Her eyes shone with eagerness. "I want to play 'Cordelia.' Mr. Oswald has offered me the part. I have studied it. I could play it tomorrow if you would be my teacher."

Merry turned with a quick gesture as if to push temptation away from him. "Don't!" he cried. "Ah, Miss Dorcas, don't go into stage life!"

"I shall go into it sooner or later." She spoke with quiet determination. "I feel sure I can play 'Cordelia'; besides, it would be so much easier to make a beginning with Enoch and Mr. Oswald and you."

Merry rose and paced for a few minutes about the room, then turned to the window and gazed out at the deserted city. The sleet of midnight had changed to a raging storm. The wind drove the snow in sudden flurries, piling it in drifts across the square.

"Miss Dorcas," he said, "come here."

The girl crossed the room. "Why," she cried, "it is a fearful night!"

"Yes. It's a fearful night for the homeless. Do you know where I might have found shelter tonight if it had not been for you? Perhaps there's a hallway somewhere that I could have slipped into, and for an hour or two the police would have left me undisturbed. I might have found an empty bench on a ferryboat, or — the Bowery Missions are open; only before one can make up his mind to seek a lodging there, they are filled to suffocation."

Dorcas shivered.

"If I had known during these weeks that anybody cared—or believed in me—perhaps I should not have gone so far down the hill. I did not dare even to hope that you thought of me again."

"Andrew," said the girl, "I care so much that I cannot tell you. Some queer strain in my nature makes me happiest when I have some one to care for. Girls at the convent used to come to me in all sorts of difficulties; the ones I loved best were the ones who needed me most. They called me 'Little Mother.'"

"'Little Mother,'" repeated Merry; then he laughed huskily. If the girl had known men she would have seen absolute famine for love, for sympathy and human understanding in the eyes that were bent upon her.

"I take back what I said a few minutes ago, Miss Dorcas, about the stage being no place for you. Women like you are needed there."

"Thank you," she said with a happy smile. "Won't you come back? Such an opportunity is waiting for you. Besides, I could never play 'Cordelia' with anyone but you, and you must be my teacher."

Merry did not answer immediately. Dorcas

had grown accustomed to the long pauses in their conversation and waited quietly. When he looked up their eyes met — his pleaded with her during one speechless moment for all his short-comings, for shirked responsibilities and failures.

"Miss Dorcas," he said, "when a man has lost hope, ambition, his faith in human nature and everything that makes life worth while, if he has gone down into the depths and still has the desire come to take up life again, is there any quality left that will help him?"

"Yes," Dorcas moved as if by a sudden impulse and laid her fingers upon the man's arm; "he has honor. So long as one is a man of honor, there is no end of a chance."

"A man of honor!" As he repeated the words his face paled suddenly. It was the same attribute which Enoch had accorded to him.

Dorcas watched him intently, her eyes full of eager anticipation. She could see him undergo some strange mental struggle. When he looked at her his face had changed. Instead of apathy there were lines of grim determination about his mouth.

"Miss Dorcas," he said slowly, "make 'Cordelia' the woman you are yourself. I am weak and broken now, as 'John Esterbrook' was; still a chance came to him at the end. I will do the best I can — if you stand by me."

Dorcas stooped for a second. With a caressing touch she swept the lock of fair hair back from his forehead. "I promise to stand by you," she whispered. "Good night."

CHAPTER XI. ZILLA PAGET

O you mind if I am atrociously frank with you?"

It was Grant Oswald who spoke. Enoch Wentworth and he sat far back in the darkened orchestra at the Gotham, watching a rehearsal.

Wentworth nodded, but turned a startled glance upon the man beside him.

"Simply because I know how powerful your play is, I want to suggest a touch that will make it stronger."

"What?"

"Understand, this is not criticism. If you don't think well of it we'll never mention it again." Oswald approached the subject diplomatically. He had begun to discover a strangely uneven temper in Enoch. There were days when he stood upon the heights of triumphant anticipation, then came intervals when everything and everybody were at odds.

"What did you think of changing?"

"It is not changing," Oswald spoke thought-[155]

fully. "What I have in mind is elaboration. You have made 'Cordelia' a loyal, tender woman, but the mother ought to be more of a foil to her. She is cruel now, vain, selfish, and deceitful, but — she is not bad enough. When it can be done, I believe in choosing an actress who has something in common with the rôle she is to play. Character comes out every time, even in acting. Don't you agree with me?"

"To a certain extent."

"Of course, in cases of downright genius it is different. There is Merry. If we except tragedy, I believe he could portray any character from gayest comedy to intense emotion. I predict for your sister's 'Cordelia' a success that will stir New York to enthusiasm, but she could never play anything but a sweet, true-hearted woman. No matter how hard she tried, she would fail in the part of a false, unscrupulous adventuress. Do you see what I am driving at?"

"I think I do."

"When you read your play to me and 'John Esterbrook's' wife took shape before my eyes, Zilla Paget came to my memory. I

ZILLA PAGET

asked you then to reserve the part for her, because, if I can judge human nature, she is the woman's prototype."

"Miss Paget must be a fiend incarnate if 'Mrs. Esterbrook' is not bad enough for her."

"I'm not as merciless as that! Let me tell you what I judge her by. Season after season she was cast in London companies for women of the lower type or of bad morals. Sometimes she was a cold-blooded, scheming adventuress, or a creature so cruel, so heartless and unwomanly that she seemed a defamation of the sex. Miss Paget was making a name for herself when an idiotic manager cast her as a sweet, refined, home-loving woman. never sat through such a pitiful failure. She played it for two nights, then she was thrown aside. She had a long run of hard luck. Managers forgot how remarkably she had played bad women. The failure as a good woman was laid up against her."

"I thought she had a tremendous success last winter."

"She had. She came in, after drifting through the provinces in small parts, and

chance threw in her way one of the most dastardly female parts ever put on the stage. She made it so real that, blasé old theater-goer as I am, I longed to throttle her. One night I happened to meet her socially. Zilla Paget assured me that in one case at least my theory was right. She was everything she portrayed on the stage, and beyond this, she was absolutely drunken with vanity."

"Are you sure she is so bad?" Enoch spoke coldly. "She is one of the most beautiful women I ever saw in my life."

"That makes her more dangerous. I have actually doubted whether I did right when I brought her to a new country and put her among decent people."

"Have you anything against the woman except — theories?"

"Merely scraps of her history, which are authentic. She came from the lowest stratum of factory life in Leeds and married above her. The young husband was devoted to her. A baby came, a little boy who was blind. To that sort of woman neither child nor husband is a tie. She broke loose, a year or two after her marriage, and lost any self-respect she had

ZILLA PAGET

ever had. The husband shot himself, she abandoned the child and left for London. Then she went on the stage."

"There was nothing then actually criminal in her career?" asked Wentworth. He was conscious of a certain absurd irritation.

Oswald hesitated. "Not actually criminal, I suppose. The law has not made so fine a point as to indict a woman when she drives a man to suicide."

"What did you think of changing in her part?" asked Wentworth brusquely.

"I was going to suggest you make 'Mrs. Esterbrook' coarser, more flamboyant, more heartless. Do not give her a solitary trait of motherhood. She is the very opposite of 'Cordelia,' with her love and tenderness for a broken father."

"How do you account for a woman of that sort having such a child?"

"Really now, Wentworth, that's up to you; both of them are your creation!"

"Yes, certainly." Enoch laughed grimly. "Still it is an anomaly you don't often see in real life."

"It is," assented Oswald. "Here's Miss [159]

Paget — watch her in the scene I've mentioned."

The eyes of both men followed the woman as she moved slowly across the stage. She dropped into a chair and waited for her cue. She did not look the traditional adventuress. She had a curiously pale, transparent skin, into which, during excited moments, the blood flushed rosily. Masses of yellow silky hair were brushed back in simple waves from her forehead. She used little make-up or artifice of any sort. Her eyes were intensely blue. There was a lovely cleft dimple in her chin. Although well along in the thirties she retained her girlish face and figure.

Wentworth turned to Oswald with a flash of irritation. "It doesn't seem fair to make a degenerate of such a woman; she doesn't look it."

"That's where the mischief lies," answered Oswald quietly.

The rehearsal went on. Miss Paget took her cue. Both men watched her critically. Wentworth drew a long breath when her scene with "Cordelia" in the second act was over. The woman certainly could act!

ZILLA PAGET

"She'll do," said Enoch heartily. "Only," he added after a moment's hesitation, "how does Dorcas strike you? Is she strong enough? It doesn't seem to me as if she saw all the possibilities of 'Cordelia.'"

"Wentworth, your sister is going to surprise you. Take my word for it. She is nervous now, but —"

"It's a devil of a risk. 'Cordelia's' such a big part and Dorcas has had no training."

"She does not need training — the conventional training you have in mind."

"If she fails it puts me in a nasty light with the public — producing a play simply to exploit my sister." Enoch's tone was curt.

"She won't fail." Oswald spoke with quiet assurance. "Think over my suggestion about 'Mrs. Esterbrook's' part. It is here where 'Cordelia' leaves her — the mother knows the daughter well enough to realize it is goodbye forever — that you want to cut out every spark of motherly feeling. Once or twice she almost pulls on the audience for sympathy. When 'Cordelia' shows her contempt for the mother and shatters her every ambition,

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH there could not be a solitary throb of pity, remorse or love — it is not in her."

Oswald dropped the subject. Wentworth began to twist his hands nervously, a habit he had when disturbed.

The Englishman sat back in silence, watching the rehearsal intently. Merry stood leaning against a stucco pillar. In this act he did not appear, but occasionally, against the sharp commands of the stage manager, his voice rang out in brief, concise suggestions.

"What a remarkable conception Merry has of every character," whispered Oswald. Enoch did not speak. "Gilbert resents my orders — in a fashion," continued the Englishman. "I told him to act on any suggestion that Merry offered. Gilbert would not say a word if you went back and threw in an idea here and there; a stage manager expects that from the author. I should think you would do it occasionally."

"It isn't in my line." Wentworth spoke sullenly. "Every move is put into the manuscript as plain as a pikestaff."

"Yes, but—" Oswald glanced at his companion curiously, then he dropped the [162]

ZILLA PAGET

subject. "It strikes me Merry has changed. The night I spoke to him on the L he was like a boy with some grand secret up his sleeve. Today he takes nothing but a half-languid interest in the whole thing. He is going to give a remarkable portrayal of 'John Esterbrook,' but when he is not acting he seems to have no interest in life. What do you lay it to?"

"Don't ask me," murmured Wentworth.
"He's a man of moods, I gave up trying to understand him years ago."

"Even when it came to the question of salary he didn't show any interest. He wouldn't set a figure. I don't know yet if he thinks the price I named was right. He closed with my first offer, signed the contract, then walked out."

"It's the biggest wad he ever drew."

"He'll prove himself worth every ha'penny of it."

Wentworth rose and pulled his hat from under the seat.

"Don't you want to see the rehearsal out?" asked Oswald suddenly.

"No, I'm going home. I may put your [163]

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH suggestion into shape while it is fresh in my mind."

Enoch paused in the theater to light a cigar. A newspaper man, who was an old friend, approached, full of eager inquiry about the progress of the play. Wentworth brushed him aside quickly and strode out to the street. A moment later he felt a twinge of remorse. The man's congratulations had been heartfelt. He could not shake off the memory of a startled astonishment that came into his face at the brusque reception. He was a good fellow, there had been pleasant companionship with him in the old days. The old days seemed ages ago, further back than the gaiety of childhood.

He left Broadway, walking with quick, nervous strides until he found himself far over on the East Side, wandering aimlessly through wretched streets, populated by the drift from nations. The sidewalks were thronged with children. Occasionally Enoch swore beneath his breath as he escaped tumbling over them during his hurried, headlong progress. When he turned a corner he found his way blockaded by a huge safe that was being hoisted into a

ZILLA PAGET

warehouse. He glanced at the street, it was ankle deep in slush. Suddenly the odor of hot bread was wafted to him from a little restaurant cavern below the sidewalk. He remembered he had eaten no breakfast, and it aroused a sudden sense of hunger. He ran quickly down the steps. The small diningroom was remarkably clean. He sat down with a sense of satisfaction which seemed alien to such a place.

"Bring me coffee and a steak, a first-class steak done rare," he ordered. "Cook it carefully."

He was alone in the small room. It was quiet except for the shrill voices of children on the sidewalk. He had not known a moment of peace or solitude for months. All his life he had scoffed at nerves as a delusion. He wondered if he had been wrong, whether nerves might not be a stern reality. If they were, he had them. His mind went flashing over the events of the past fortnight, since the night when, weary, harassed, and hopeless, he returned from Montreal to be met by Dorcas with the news that Merry had returned and was ready to begin rehearsals.

It still exasperated him when he remembered how stubbornly she had refused details of Andrew's home-coming. All he learned was that the actor had seen Oswald and was rehearsing from morning till night.

A few days later, in the foyer of the Gotham, when he came face to face with Merry, the plane of their future intercourse was determined instantly. Wentworth had been in a mood to welcome reconciliation and friendship; Andrew was cold, courteous, and singularly unapproachable. Enoch's warmth was chilled and his pride aroused. He plunged fiercely into work, scarcely snatching time to eat or sleep. More than once Oswald had remonstrated: he could see that the man was working beyond the limit of human capacity. Work was the only thing that would whip retrospection from his mind. Drink had never been a temptation to Wentworth — it was nothing but a side issue to sociability so he did not take to it now. He realized he was losing old friends; he had tossed one of them aside today.

The intuition which is bred by a guilty conscience began to play strange pranks with [166]

ZILLA PAGET

him. He felt as if Oswald had guessed his secret and was driving him into a corner by the suggestion that he remodel the play. He saw Dorcas each day grow colder and more suspicious. Merry at one glance had thrust him outside the pale of acquaintanceship. Within ten days "The House of Esterbrook" would have its first production.

Enoch shivered with apprehension as he thought of it. A queer thing had loomed up in his mind during the past few days. decade ago a club friend with a fad for palmistry had insisted on reading his hand. The man prophesied a physical and moral downfall in the course of twelve years. Wentworth laughed at the idea, forgot it completely, then one night the memory of it came to him like a shot. He would have given all he possessed to return to the morning when Merry burst in upon him full of gaiety and hope. He could not go back; it was like unsnarling a tangle of string when one found no visible end where the task could be commenced.

He was aroused by a clatter of dishes. The waiter set the breakfast before him. As he [167]

ate he laid a morning paper on the table and began to read: there had been no chance earlier in the day to glance at it. The first thing his eve fell upon was a column about "The House of Esterbrook." The public seemed to await the production with unusual anticipation. Merry had the enthusiastic following which is so often bestowed upon an erratic, lovable genius. Wentworth's fame as a journalist was of long standing, and Oswald, Englishman as he was, had already won friends among newspaper men. Wentworth read it quickly, then he turned to the news Nothing interested him — the of the day. sparkle had gone out of life as the bead dies on champagne. He drank a second, then a third cup of strong coffee, which acted upon him as whisky does on some men.

When he climbed the uneven steps to the sidewalk the world had grown sunnier; there was a future before him, fame, riches, and the applause of millions. He reached Third Avenue, ran up the stairs to the elevated, and, puffing slowly at a cigar, gazed on the rush of life below. He was deliberating how it was best to approach Merry on the subject of

ZILLA PAGET

changing that second act. Oswald was a keen critic, and Enoch had seen the necessity of it himself; it was the one weak spot in the play. From the moment when he burned the labor of half a lifetime he realized his own incapacity for play-writing. He himself could do nothing to the drama, but he felt a chill of terror at the thought of speaking to Merry on the subject.

CHAPTER XII. THE VOLKS

CITY'S electric lights were beginning to blaze through the twilight when Wentworth knocked at the door of Merry's dressing-room.

"Come!" cried the actor sharply.

As Enoch entered he felt a throb of longing for the old warm friendship. Andrew's face paled for a moment as he looked up at his He nodded but did not speak. Kelly. visitor. who acted as Merry's valet during his prosperous seasons, lifted a heap of garments from a chair and set it before Enoch, who took it in silence. Andrew sat staring into a mirror while he experimented with a make-up for the broken-down convict in the third act. dashed line after line into his face, blending each lightly into the grease paint. Nobody spoke — even Kelly seemed to have fallen under the spell of quiet. He knelt on the floor polishing shoes with stolid industry. Enoch wondered curiously what the keen old Irishman was thinking. He had known nothing [170]

THE VOLKS

between them but a most fraternal friendship. The silence became oppressive. At last Wentworth spoke.

"Are you going to be alone soon, Merry? I want to have a talk with you about business."

Andrew did not look up while he answered carelessly, "I'll be alone in a few minutes. Kelly has an errand to do at the tailor's. You may go now," he added, nodding to the valet; "there's no hurry about the shoes."

When the old man shut the door behind him Andrew did not turn his gaze from the mirror. The reflection of Wentworth's face was close beside his own. He could see that his visitor was ill at ease.

"Well?" he said interrogatively.

"Can't you turn round and face me while we talk?" asked the elder man impatiently.

Andrew wheeled about and his eyes met Wentworth's calmly. "Certainly, I can face you."

The red surged into Enoch's face, then hard lines wrinkled about his mouth. His mood had changed. He spoke with brutal conciseness.

"Oswald and I have decided that there

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH ought to be a few changes made in the text of — the play."

"Of your play," corrected Merry.

"There is one weak point in it," Enoch went on deliberately. "'Mrs. Esterbrook' draws on the sympathy of the audience for a a few moments when 'Cordelia' leaves her. A woman of that caliber could have no such feeling."

"No?"

"No." Wentworth repeated the word almost furiously. He began to twist his hands.

"I suppose that act ought to be rewritten."

"Not rewritten, simply elaborated. Strike out some lines, put in others."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Why don't I do it?" Enoch jumped to his feet shaken by a sudden impulse of rage. "That's a nice question to ask me."

"It has never seemed to me there was anything particularly nice in the whole situation." Andrew's tones were on a calm level.

"We'll leave that out of the question—altogether," growled Wentworth. "I should never have intruded upon you but for this

THE VOLKS

reason. You can see the exigencies of the case. You've got to retouch the play."

"I will not lay a pen to the play." Andrew turned as if the conversation were at an end and began to pencil careworn wrinkles on his cheeks.

Enoch tipped his chair back against the wall, put his feet on the rungs, and began to think. Nobody knew so well as he that one faced a barricade with Merry in a doggedly obstinate mood. Inwardly he was at white heat; the blind groping hope for reconciliation was at an end; still he knew if he ever needed diplomacy it was now. If he were to precipitate a storm, Merry was capable of flinging over his engagement at the last moment.

"Let me explain," began Wentworth laboriously. A tap at the door interrupted him. It was opened and Oswald stepped in. He seated himself on the edge of a trunk.

"Have you mentioned to Mr. Merry the suggestion I made about the second act?" he asked, turning to Wentworth.

"We were discussing it when you came in."

"What do you think of it, Merry?"

"I really have not had time to give it

a thought." Andrew looked uninterested. "Besides, you know I do not come into that act, and I have scarcely seen it rehearsed." He picked up a towel and began to wipe the make-up off his face.

"It is simply this. 'Mrs. Esterbrook' is an utterly heartless woman. Dead to conscience as she is at the beginning, she comes out of her life's tragedy calloused beyond all redemption. It strikes a false note to have her repent for even a second. She does not know what mother-love or love of any sort means. With her last exit she ought to leave an audience hating and despising her. Now one feels a sudden touch of sympathy. She must be irredeemably bad. Then, too, it is not only true to the woman's character, but 'Cordelia' shines whiter against it."

Merry nodded. "You're right, I fancy. Wentworth has only to change a few lines to throw the whole thing plumb. You can do it in half an hour, old chap."

When Oswald turned to Wentworth he caught a look on the man's face that puzzled him, a flash of impotent rage, hate, and apprehension. Enoch realized he had revealed his

THE VOLKS

soul for a moment. He picked up his hat and spoke brusquely. "You two finish talking it over, I have a thousand things to tend to."

"Is Wentworth — is he touchy? Did he feel that I was criticizing his play?" asked Oswald anxiously when the door closed with a hasty rap.

"I don't think it's that." Merry spoke slowly, then he dashed to another subject. "I want to consult you about changing one of the people in the cast, little Katie Durham."

"Oh, the child in the first act?"

"She's a bright enough youngster. She tells me she once got a hundred dollars a week in vaudeville as a toe dancer." Merry laughed. "A toe dancer scarcely fills the bill for the small 'Cordelia.'"

"She struck me in rehearsal this morning as lacking in something."

"She is lacking in everything. She's a stilted, grown-up, little brat; there's nothing childlike about her. When she clings to my neck shrieking, 'Father,' in that ear-splitting baby pipe of hers, she jars every nerve in my body."

"Let her go. Only it is a problem where to find a sweet, natural stage child."

"I can lay my hands on one immediately," said Merry quietly. "It's a youngster who has never been behind the footlights in her life."

"Could you do anything with her in ten days?"

"I should like to try. She's a gentle, refined, sweet-voiced little girl; besides, she has dramatic blood in her — that always tells. Do you remember George Volk?"

Why, of course," cried "George Volk! Oswald after a moment's hesitation. ever became of the man? Did he die?"

"Nobody knows." Merry's voice had a bitter tone in it. "Better for some people if he had died. This little Julie I want a chance for is his child."

"Where is Volk?"

"I can't tell you. If he's alive he must be far down by this time. He was a wretched sot when I saw him last."

"By Jove! what an impetuous stage lover he did make! I saw him in a big production the first time I came to America, then in Lon-[176]

THE VOLKS

don. He was the handsomest man that ever stepped on the stage."

"A handsome piece of beef! Ten years ago he married one of the sweetest, most loyal women I ever knew. She was on the stage, but she never won much notice. Her work was so quiet and delicate that she appealed to the few. She was in a company with me for two seasons. How Volk made her suffer! The beast!"

"Is she alive?"

"Yes. I hadn't heard of the Volks for years. I was going home last night when a woman touched me on the arm. She was lame and looked ill. A little girl clung to her. I did not know her. 'I'm Alice Volk,' she said. I put them in a cab and took them up to Harlem, to the best old woman in the world."

"Are they in want?" asked Oswald.

"They were starving, in rags, and shoeless. The child pulled at my heart strings. She isn't quite seven and small for her age, but the way she cares for the poor, crippled little mother—" Andrew laid a gray wig upon his knee and began to brush it vigorously. "I

don't want to throw this Durham youngster out of a job, though, simply because I can't endure her. She's common as dirt, but she can't help it. Have you seen the mother?"

"Yes," said Oswald gravely.

"What feazes me is how we could delude an audience into believing that this sharp-nosed, uncanny-looking, shrill-tongued little ape could develop into Miss Wentworth's 'Cordelia.' They're different breeds entirely."

"You're right." Oswald's voice was emphatic. "I don't know why I did not see it. Perhaps because the child has little to do except to follow her father about."

"It's that following the father about which I mean to make the strongest point in the first act."

"Engage the child immediately."

"I'll have to do diplomatic work to get her."

"How?"

"Alice Volk would rather starve than let her child go on the stage. She has been hoping we might find a small part for herself which she could play — crippled."

"Poor soul."

THE VOLKS

"I hinted that we might give the little Julie a chance. She snatched the child away as if she thought I meant to kidnap her. When a woman has seen the seamy side of life as she has — you understand."

Oswald nodded gravely. "We must find a way to get around her."

Merry sat writing a letter in the manager's office the next afternoon when Oswald entered, accompanied by Dorcas.

"I want you to tell Miss Wentworth about the little Volk girl," said the Englishman. "I have enlisted her sympathy. If the mother felt that some woman here would be interested in the child she might change her mind."

"I'll do anything I can," said Dorcas heartily. "I am glad you are making a change. It will improve the first act wonderfully to have the child sweet and real. Then," the girl laughed in a half-embarrassed way, "did you ever look at a picture of yourself when you were at the tadpole age, and wonder if it could have possibly been you? That has been my frame of mind since I laid eyes on the little 'Cordelia.'"

"I don't blame you," Oswald smiled. "I can't imagine why we made such a blunder. Merry puts it just the way you do."

"Thank you, Mr. Merry." Dorcas turned to the actor with a grateful smile. "I am ready to go with you any time to see Mrs. Volk."

Dorcas had a new insight to Merry's character when she found how his friends held him in esteem. There was not a touch, in Mrs. Billerwell's greeting, of hero worship or deference to the man who had won fame. It was merely a droll blend of loving devotion and motherly tyranny.

Merry jumped to his feet when Mrs. Volk entered, with Julie chinging shyly to her gown. Dorcas felt instantly a throb of sympathy and warm friendship. Merry had told her something of the pitiful story on the way uptown.

"You said once, Miss Dorcas," he reminded her, "that you were never so happy as when you had some one to mother. Alice Volk needs mothering. I doubt if she has a friend in the world except Mother Billerwell and myself. Mrs. Billerwell is pure gold, but Alice needs a woman like you."

THE VOLKS

Half an hour later they waited on the platform of an L station for a down-town train. They had scarcely spoken since leaving the Harlem house. Merry realized how deeply the girl's heart had been stirred. They entered the train and took a seat together in silence. She sat gazing at the city below. Then she turned suddenly.

"Little Julie is to begin rehearsals tomorrow morning," she said. "The mother made only one condition: they are to be known under another name. She is in terror lest her husband finds them."

"That's all right, but do you think the child can play the small 'Cordelia'?" asked Merry anxiously.

"You can do anything you wish with that child. She has a soul and sweetness, and she understands. There is something in her—we call it magnetism in older people—which will reach across the footlights and grip every man and woman in the audience. The child will help me wonderfully. Now I won't have to create a new 'Cordelia' when I come on the stage. My 'Cordelia' is simply the little girl grown older and wiser, with more

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH love for her father and a larger knowledge of life."

"You understand perfectly."

"You and I ought to understand 'Cordelia' if any one could."

Dorcas sat in silence while they rushed over the lighted city with its insistent ghimpses of sordid life. Merry saw her chin tremble once and her eyes grow misty; then she spoke suddenly: "She must have lived through awful experiences."

"Alice Volk has seen the very depths. She suffered more than misery and neglect; there was actual brutality. I knew her before Volk came into her life. She played with the first New York company I was in. She was the gayest little creature then you can imagine — a whimsical, laughing, care-free, happy child."

"Gay!" Dorcas spoke incredulously. "The gaiety has gone."

"It has been wrung out of her."

"I never had a real woman friend except the sisters at the convent," said Dorcas. "I think Alice Volk and I will be friends. We can help each other."

THE VOLKS

"Each other? I had not thought of it in that way. Your friendship will mean a great deal to her. It is like reaching out a hand to some one who is drowning."

"Alice Volk is different from any one I ever met. When little Julie ran out to speak to you, I followed her. The mother laid her hand on my arm, drew me back into the room, then she closed the door and kissed me. She did not say a word. Any other woman would have kissed me while I was saying 'Goodbye,' — before you and Mrs. Billerwell. She does unexpected things that cannot help drawing one to her."

"Poor soul!" said Merry.

The conductor entered, shutting the door behind him with a crash. "Twenty-third Street!" he called.

"Let us get off and have dinner somewhere," suggested the actor. "I want to talk to you—for hours."

CHAPTER XIII. A PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

ORCAS and Merry paused for a moment before a flight of steps which led up to what had once been a fine private residence. Its exclusive days were past; it was beckoning with a garish blaze of light to every passerby. Through the open door came strains from the overture to "William Tell."

"What a queer place," said the girl.

"You can't realize its queerness until we are inside. The crowd that gathers here is as motley as any you find in New York."

Dorcas ran lightly up the steps. The café, shabby and weather-beaten outdoors, was bizarre inside. At the farther end a daub of painted canvas attempted to create the illusion of sunlit fields. Against it rose a theatrical apple-tree. A hundred electric lights blazed inside crimson apples on its widespread branches. Under it, at a huddle of tables, people were dining vociferously.

PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

The place shrieked its antagonism to the civilized ceremony of feeding. Humanity dug its elbows into one another while it handled knives and forks, and screamed its conversation. The rooms reeked with a hundred odors of highly-seasoned food and tobacco smoke. It was a bewildering blend of light and smells and noise. Dorcas followed Merry through a labyrinth to a small table in a distant corner, hedged about with palms.

"I come here time and again," confessed Merry after they were seated. "I love the place; the crowd is so interesting. People let themselves loose in a coop like this; they enjoy life frankly."

"I should think they did." Dorcas laughed gaily.

Across the room a party of college lads were humming a ragtime song in utter inharmony to the orchestra's music. Corks were popping amid the rattle of dishes and silver while laughter in a hundred tones, and the languages of all the old Latin races, were blended in the strange babel.

"It's a droll little world," said Merry.
[185]

Dorcas pulled off her gloves and sat smoothing them between her fingers.

"I remember." Andrew gazed about him in a reminiscent mood: "one season I was tied up with a summer production, and it was horribly lonesome in New York. There was not a soul in our company I wanted to fraternize with. Enoch was West. I used to come here night after night and work myself into a light-hearted mood. I had a part I hated. I did not go on until the second act, so sometimes I staved here until half-past seven. The place waked me up. I got into a queer humor while watching people. Before it wore off I used to dash to the theater, as one acts when you are overpowered with sleep, and try to get to bed before you go wide awake again. Usually I don't have to hammer myself into the disposition for work. When I am cast for some rôle that makes one fairly snort with impatience, it is horribly hard to feel like it. If I get a human character, I love it."

"Like 'John Esterbrook'?"

"Yes, like 'John Esterbrook.' Miss Dorcas," Merry went on eagerly, "I went tramp[186]

PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

ing yesterday — alone. I found myself within sight of another State before I pulled up. I was — Heaven knows how many miles from anywhere. I threshed things out with myself. I'm going to make 'John Esterbrook' the biggest thing that has struck New York in vears."

Dorcas laughed. She felt foolishly happy.

"I am so glad," she said.

"It's up to me to do the best I can: I owe it to you," there was grim determination in Merry's voice; "to you and Oswald, he's a prince of a good fellow; now Alice Volk and the child come into it."

"And yourself."

"Yes, myself. If I succeed, it means retrieving more than you imagine."

"And you will confess you wrote the play?" asked Dorcas.

"Not - yet."

"Why?"

"Miss Dorcas," Merry's voice had a tone of entreaty in it, "I want to ask one thing of you. I ask it because your faith in me is so great and uplifting. Drop the authorship of the play. I cannot explain, I cannot [187]

fight the thoughts you have of me. You said once, 'I believe in you.' Do you remember?"

Dorcas looked at him with steadfast eyes and nodded.

"Go on believing. It's the kindest thing you can do for me, and — for Enoch."

Their eyes made a compact though no word was spoken.

They lingered over the strange dishes that came and went. Food seemed merely a circumstance, an excuse for being alone and together. They felt curiously isolated, for the noise made a retreat for them as silence does. A sudden lull fell on the babel of sound. The orchestra, which had rested for a few minutes, began again — not one of its long overtures, but a prelude to the florid music in an Italian opera. Through the murky atmosphere a woman's voice shrilled out with rare sweetness.

Dorcas rose to her feet for a second, searching for the singer; then she seated herself with her back to the table. The crash of dishes, the rattle of silver, and the popping of corks continued, but tongues were stilled

PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

except for one voice. It was singing the tremendous aria from "Ernani." The girl drew a long breath as the last note died away into silence then she turned eagerly to Merry.

"Who is she?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

She turned again to look at the singer, who stood crushed into a narrow balcony which was crowded to discomfort by a piano and four musicians. The woman was absurdly fat and absurdly gowned. Years ago, in the palmy days of a concert tour, she had swept upon the platform in a robe of burnt orange velvet splashed gorgeously with silver lace and scintillating embroidery. It had seen years of service, then grown tawdry, unfashionable, soiled, and grotesquely queer. It reminded Dorcas of the stately door in its last stage of shabbiness. The woman's straw-colored hair was gathered into a ridiculous pompadour. Across the dining-room. through murky waves of tobacco smoke, the girl could see careworn wrinkles about the woman's eyes. The vivid scarlet of her cheeks was pitifully false, false as the white-

ness of her vast, bare shoulders. Again she began to sing, something which came thrilling from the wonderful throat with perfect coloratura. She threw back her head and tilted her face till Dorcas saw only the profile. For one moment the gross lines disappeared; instead came a glimpse of a beauty and picturesqueness, a dignity which belonged to the days of youth and power, the royal days of a singer.

The room rang with an encore, then came a shriek of command. "Dance!" shouted the group of students in a corner.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas piteously, "oh! how can they do it?"

The musicians huddled themselves and their instruments closer together, indifferently as if it were part of every night's program. The pianist struck a few bars of some tinkling thing in a musical comedy, then the singer began to sway her huge body. There was no space for her feet to move. She sang to the accompaniment, but the physical effort made her wheeze. The orchestra dashed into a tripping chorus, and the enthusiasm of the guests waxed high. Cheers

PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

were intermingled with laughter and screams of derision.

"Oh!" cried Dorcas, "oh! the shame of it!"

The singer sank in a chair exhausted, then she rose and pushed her way down from the balcony. Dorcas watched her with a pitiful gaze. Perspiration was washing white streaks through the patches of rouge on her cheeks.

"Who is the woman?" she asked.

"Twenty-five years ago her name was famous from one end of Italy to the other. When she went to Genoa to fill an engagement the whole town turned out to meet her, the shops were closed, and it was a public holiday. The people pelted her with flowers and screamed themselves hoarse in a welcome. She was the star of the Bellini in Naples. She sang in Paris and London. She came here, grew sick, and could not fill her engagements. A manager went back on her, she lost what money she had, friends deserted her, she came down to — this."

"Oh, the poor soul!" Dorcas' voice was a whisper.

"Hers was an unusual case," said Merry.

"She is only fifty-three now, so I've heard. It makes you realize into what a short bit of our lives fame is crowded — if fame comes to us. The has-beens in our profession are an army, a pitiful army. Unless one has a home and some one in it to cherish and love, the lonely days of old age are — "Andrew laughed cheerlessly. "Well, I never think of them."

He stretched out his hand to intercept a boy who wandered between the tables with a tray full of crimson roses. He laid a bunch of them before Dorcas. She buried her face in the cool petals.

"Shall we go?" asked Merry.

As they pushed their way through the maze of crowded tables they passed a woman who sat dining alone. She wore an orange velvet gown, and a shabby lace scarf covered her naked shoulders. Dorcas paused for a moment, laid her hand upon the woman's arm, and spoke a few words in Italian. The singer looked up and put a grimy, ring-bedizened hand upon the girl's fingers. Merry stood watching them. The woman looked very old and faded under the white

PRIMA DONNA OF THE PAST

glare of the electricity, but her face grew eager and tremulous while she poured out her soul in her own language. Dorcas took one rose from the cluster in her arms and laid the rest of the fragrant blossoms beside the singer's plate.

"You'll forgive me for parting with your flowers?" she whispered as she rejoined Merry.

"I'm glad you did it. Once upon a time stage bouquets were a worn-out sensation for that woman; today I guess she is showered with roses about once in a blue moon."

Dorcas paused near the door to nod goodbye to the singer, who sat gazing after them with her chin buried in the red roses. Suddenly Dorcas turned to Merry. Her face had grown white, and she put her arm within his. He clasped it with a strong grip, but neither of them spoke. At the same moment they had caught sight of Enoch Wentworth. He was seated in an alcove at a small table hedged about with palms. Zilla Paget sat facing him. Enoch's hands clasped one of hers which lay upon the table. They were engrossed in each other.

Dorcas stopped abruptly when they reached the foot of the steps. "Oh!" she whispered appealingly, "Andrew, save Enoch from that woman!"

CHAPTER XIV. A SEALED BARGAIN

ENTWORTH sat in a small room at the theater, which he had appropriated as his It led directly off the box office. He was glancing over a heap of press clippings when the door opened and Merry walked in.

"Good morning." There was a surprised glance on Enoch's face while he spoke.

Andrew nodded a response, then he drew a package of manuscript from his pocket. Wentworth's eyes turned on him curiously while he flattened it out on the table before him. No unnecessary courtesies passed between them.

"I rewrote the scene as you suggested," said Andrew carelessly.

"That was good of you." In his surprise Wentworth showed an impulsive friendliness. He stretched out his hand for the manuscript.

There was no cordiality in Merry's face. He glanced quietly through the written sheets. [195]

"You count this change in the play a necessity?" he asked brusquely.

"I guess that's what it might be called." Wentworth's voice was impatient, and a frown chased across his face. "Oswald's been asking for it this morning. When a quiet fellow like him makes up his mind to have a thing, he's apt to be confoundedly insistent."

"Then you want it?"

"Certainly."

"I sat up until daylight to write this. It's an improvement on the other act; I can see that myself. Oswald will tell you, I think, that it carries out his ideas exactly. Before I hand it over I want to make a dicker with you."

Wentworth stared at him blankly. "A dicker?" he repeated. "Is it money?"

"Money!" Andrew's face grew harsh with scorn.

"What is it then?"

"I was dining last night at Colgazzi's. I—"

Wentworth's face grew suddenly scarlet, then it whitened.

A SEALED BARGAIN

"I saw you there." Merry's voice was relentless. "I don't know a blessed thing about the Paget woman, for or against her. I do know this, though: every man who has lived among good women knows she is not fit company for — your sister for instance."

"Who said she was?" snarled Wentworth.
"I had not thought of throwing her into my sister's society. Dorcas would not have to tolerate even a passing acquaintance with her behind the scenes if I had my way."

"She is not fit to be seen with a decent man."

"You give me the credit then of being—a decent man?" sneered Enoch.

"To a certain limit — I do."

"Well, what do you want?" Wentworth turned an apprehensive glance upon him.

"I want you to promise, before I turn over this manuscript, that you will have nothing to do with Zilla Paget except in a business way."

"Why, are you interested in her yourself?"

"My God, Enoch!" Andrew stuffed the roll of paper in his pocket and jumped to his feet.

"Here, sit down. I want this affair straightened out — now."

Merry did not answer. He walked across the office and stood beside a table where a litter of photographs lay. He picked one up carelessly and glanced at it. It was an exquisite portrait of Dorcas. Her eyes gazed into his with a straightforward look which was characteristic of the girl.

"Will you tell me," there was stern demand in Wentworth's voice, "will you explain why you are so concerned about my morals?"

"I don't care a damn about your morals," answered Merry contemptuously. "I was thinking about your sister. I am still fool enough to believe that you have some decency left. I will hand over this act, rewritten as you want it, when you promise to have nothing to do with Zilla Paget."

When Merry stopped speaking he took a seat opposite Enoch and waited for a reply.

A visiting card lay on the table. Wentworth picked it up and tore it into halves. He sat tearing and retearing it in perfect silence. When it was reduced to fragments,

A SEALED BARGAIN

he gathered them into the hollow of his hand and dropped them in the waste basket; then he looked across at Merry.

"That was Miss Paget's card," he said harshly. "I'm through with her."

Merry took the manuscript from his pocket, laid it on the table before Enoch, and walked out.

A few minutes later Enoch opened the door which led into the box office. A young man sat beside the window.

"Dingley," he said, "I have locked the outside door. Don't let a soul in on me. I can't see Mr. Oswald even. Tell him I am busy, writing."

Wentworth locked the door of the office, sat down in his big chair, and picked up the manuscript. He read it rapidly, slipped a blank sheet of paper into a typewriter, and began to copy it with slow deliberation. When it was finished he read each typed page carefully. He tacked them together and rose to his feet. He began to search the office rapidly with his eyes, then he turned to a wash-bowl in the corner. He crushed into a loose bunch each of the sheets which held

Merry's writing and touched the paper with a match. It leaped into a red blaze. He watched it carefully, poking the sheets over with a paper knife until each one fell away into a shivering black ash. When every spark had died he turned on a faucet, and the light ashes were swept down the waste pipe. He rubbed a speck of grime from his hands and opened the box office door. Oswald sat on a high stool beside the window.

"Here is the second act," said Wentworth brusquely. "I imagine it will suit you. The changes are exactly what you suggested."

"Oh, splendid!" Oswald's voice was cordial.
"I'm ever so glad you felt like it. You will say yourself it is an improvement."

"I hope so." Enoch spoke listlessly. "And, Dingley, while I think of it, send a message back to Miss Paget. Ask if I can see her now, in her dressing-room for a few minutes." He turned to Oswald. "I must explain to her the change we're making. Better have the part copied at once; it must be put into quick rehearsal."

CHAPTER XV. THE OPENING NIGHT

ORCAS stood motionless in the wings, with Merry beside her, leaning against a table. The curtain had fallen on the third act of "The House of Esterbrook." The girl's body throbbed from head to foot, and she felt as if the emotions of a lifetime had been crowded into that single hour. There was a babel of noise behind the scenes; in front the applause sounded like a tempest. At intervals the handclaps died away as from weariness, only to begin again with tremendous vigor.

"Come," said Merry; "we must go out again."

"Again?" whispered the girl.

"Yes," Merry smiled; "this time the two of us alone."

"The two of us?"

"The two of us — alone." There was a low, tender thrill in Merry's voice.

He took her hand and led her out upon the [201]

empty stage. The curtain was lifting slowly. From where she stood she saw Enoch standing in the wings. His face was flushed with excitement. The audience looked to the girl like a blur of color and human forms. The people swayed forward eagerly, and the applause became uproarious. A voice cried, "Speech! speech!" It began to come insistently from the back of the house. The cry was taken up by men and women everywhere in the audience. Dorcas turned to Merry, Oswald was beckoning to him from the wings, but the actor shook his head.

"I could not make a speech tonight if my life depended on it," he whispered, and the curtain descended slowly.

A new cry came from the clamorous house. Some one was shouting for the author. Dorcas laid her hand upon Merry's arm.

"They want you," she cried.

He smiled and shook his head.

She heard Oswald urge Enoch to go in front of the curtain. The noise in front grew louder. The girl flew across the stage and put her hand upon her brother's shoulder.

THE OPENING NIGHT

"Enoch," she pleaded in a whisper, "take Merry with you and explain."

Wentworth left her without a word. Oswald and the stage manager beckoned to him from the wings. She took a few flying steps as if to hold him back, then stopped. Merry had called her. She paused, staring into his eyes with terror.

"Enoch must not go out there alone," she protested in a low voice. "He must not do it. You should be with him. It is the last chance he has to make restitution. He will never, never do such a thing as this!"

"Listen," she heard Merry's whisper clearly through the din. "Dear, it does not matter. What does anything matter? The play is a success. You believe in me. I did it—for you. What do I care about the people out there? They are nothing to us."

"Oh!" cried Dorcas, "oh, I will go and tell them myself. They must know!"

She darted toward the edge of the drop curtain, then she stopped. A silence had fallen, not only upon the house but behind the scenes. Stage hands who had been dragging properties about stood motionless.

A shiver crept over the girl. She felt Merry lay his hand on hers with a steadying clasp that seemed to quiet her. She could hear Enoch speaking. He had a strong, vibrant voice. Every one behind the scenes was listening and understanding except herself. His voice grew blurred as faces in the audience had been. She turned to glance at Merry. Once a look of consuming hatred flitted across his face, and his lips grew pallid as gray ashes.

Dorcas pulled away from his clasping hand and ran to her dressing-room. She was choking with sobs. She felt her fingers tingle where Andrew had touched them, and there was a look of terror in her eyes.

Alice Volk sat waiting for her in the dressing-room. Little Julie jumped to her feet when Dorcas entered. The girl did not speak, but clasped the child to her bosom.

"Alice," she whispered, "help me to dress as soon as you can. And Julie, ask Dugald to get a carriage. I want to go home."

The woman kissed the girl's neck as she unbuttoned her gown. "It has been an [204]

THE OPENING NIGHT

awful strain. I know all about it - but, Miss Dorcas, your future is made."

The child returned in a minute. "Mr. Wentworth has a carriage ordered. Dugald says will you go with him?"

"No," cried Dorcas; "tell Dugald I'll be ready in ten minutes. I am going home alone."

Merry stood waiting at the stage entrance when she went out. He had heard Julie deliver the message. "Good night. Miss Dorcas," he said. "Sleep well. Remember, everything is all right. I owe it to you, I owe you more than you understand. You made good tonight; the papers will tell you so in the morning. Good night. God bless vou!"

"Good night." The girl shivered for a moment. It was intensely cold, and she drew a fur coat close to her chin. The cabman drove quickly, for the streets were emptied of vehicles. Along Broadway the theaters were dark.

Jason stood waiting to open the door when the girl ran up the steps. His dusky old face was one grin of delight. He had just re-[205]

turned from the theater and was growing impatient for the triumph of a homecoming.

"Missy," he cried, "yo' cert'ly done us proud. My soul! I couldn't er b'lieved de baby I toted yeahs en yeahs ago ud ebber a' lived to act ez fine ez yo' done. I used to play I was yo' ol' black mule. I reckon yo' don' 'member, honey, ridin' mule on ol' Uncle Jason's back, do yo'? En dar yo' was, honey, a-workin' me up till I 'clar to goodness I mos' cried my ol' eyes out. When Marse Enoch come out en made dat speech, folkses hollered en got to der feet clappin' en bangin' sticks on de floor, I 'clar to de Lawd dar wa'n't a prouder ol' darky in New York den Uncle Jason."

Dorcas began to laugh and cry at once.

"I don' wonder yo's all done up, Missy. I's got de fines' supper ready fo' yo' yo' ebber see."

Dorcas was too unnerved to eat. She swallowed a cup of coffee and nibbled at the good things Jason had prepared. Then she went upstairs and began to undress. She brushed her hair, plaited it in two long braids, and slipped into a gray kimono, which folded

THE OPENING NIGHT

itself about her in sheeny waves. The coffee had driven sleep away. She tossed a shawl about her shoulders and ran down through the silent house to the library. Wentworth often read there until long after midnight, and a coal fire was burning brightly.

She pushed an armchair close to the hearth and dropped into it wearily. She realized that she was very tired. She had not thought of nerves or body during the long weeks of rehearsal, with the incessant study, the multitude of detail, and the strange irregularity of life.

She began to live over again the last few hours and drew a long breath as she remembered the strangling terror which laid hold of her before she made her first entrance. When she heard her cue she felt dumb, crippled, almost blinded for one moment. The smile on Zilla Paget's face, as she stepped from the wings, stung her into action. There was scorn in it, and cruelty smoothed over by a sweet, beguiling perfidy, which aroused in the girl a sudden hate that she had never felt in her life before. The hatred made her forget everything except her part.

The recollection of a bit of gossip had flashed to her memory: Zilla Paget had prophesied that her "Cordelia" would be a dead failure. Before the end of that second act the intense loathing and scorn which Merry had put into her lines became real. The woman understood. She shrank with a terror which was scarcely simulated during the girl's denunciation of a mother who had lost all claim upon a child for love or respect. Seven times the curtain rose and fell upon the two women. Once a volley of hisses was hurled at Zilla Paget, and she smiled in happy triumph. Oswald and Merry stood in the wings watching the act. The intensity which Dorcas threw into her part stirred both men strongly, as it did the audience. They had anticipated womanly sweetness and tenderness, but they had not gauged her emotion to the depths.

"I never dreamed she could do anything like this," said Oswald slowly.

Merry did not speak. He had caught Zilla Paget's subtle smile. He knew there was more than acting in the scene.

While Dorcas sat gazing into the red caves
[208]

THE OPENING NIGHT

of the coal fire she went over each situation in the play, step by step. Once she buried her face in the folds of her shawl; her cheeks were throbbing hotly. She felt Merry's kiss burn upon her lips. There had been no real kisses at rehearsal. The trust and love and gratitude with which the broken old convict turned to his child seemed real for a moment: she felt it when the actor touched her lips. Then she had fallen sobbing into his arms. She heard the audience sob with her. When she turned to glance aside through half-blinded eves, she met the derisive smile of Zilla Paget, who stood in the wings. There was jealousy in her scorn. Her part was over for the night; she was dead to people in front. They had forgotten her, in spite of the applause she had won a half hour before. It hurt her vanity.

Dorcas came out of her reverie with a start. The door behind her closed, and Enoch walked in. His face was glowing with eager, impetuous triumph, his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes shone. He stooped suddenly to kiss his sister. She did not speak. It seemed years since she had seen him in such a mood.

"Dorry," he cried, "why did you rush home? Everybody was waiting to congratulate you. You lifted people off their feet; I swear, you took me off mine! The critics went wild over you and wanted to interview you. Tomorrow you'll be the talk of the town."

Everything that had blurred life seemed to vanish. It was wonderful that in a few hours the dreams of a lifetime should have come true. The girl laughed. Her heart had suddenly grown light.

"Enoch, I cannot make myself believe it."

He stood beside her with a proud smile upon his lips. "Dorry, you're a queer proposition. Any other girl would have had her head turned by the triumph tonight. Why, child, in three hours you climbed straight onto a pedestal that many women work half a lifetime to reach. Even then they often miss it."

Enoch bent and lifted her face till her eyes looked into his. "There were minutes," he said fondly, "when I actually questioned whether it was the little sister herself or not."

Dorcas had never seen her brother so strangely excited. She wondered for a mo-[210]

THE OPENING NIGHT

ment if he had been drinking, but she saw it was the intoxication of sudden success, not of wine. He paced about the library, talking, laughing, building a thousand plans for the future. The girl watched him curiously. It was a strange transition from the sullen silence of months. The Enoch of light-hearted boyhood days had returned.

"You have a great future, Dorry." He stopped abruptly and his voice grew grave. "There is one thing I want to say. Don't," he hesitated and began to pace the room again, as if choosing his words carefully, "don't make a hero of Merry. He did well tonight. I have seen him set the whole town talking as he did in 'Esterbrook,' then topple back and go down, away down."

Dorcas rose from her chair and tossed the long braids of hair over her shoulders. Her eyes and cheeks were blazing. Wentworth's face grew inexorable. "Enoch," she cried, "how dare you say such a thing — to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean!" He saw her chin tremble. In spite of her anger she was on the verge of tears. "When people were [211]

calling for the author, how did you dare to go out and take the applause? Have you no conscience, no honor left?"

"Merry got as much applause as one man could stand." He looked at her with dogged defiance.

"That makes you none the less — a thief."

Enoch did not answer. He pulled a cigar from his vest pocket, hit it, and began to smoke. He did not flinch before his sister's gaze.

"I should have been the happiest girl in the world tonight, almost foolishly happy." There was a pitiful quaver in her voice. "I feel now as if I were disgraced. Men have gone to the penitentiary for stealing—less than you did."

Wentworth laughed scornfully. He tossed his cigar into the heart of the fire and turned upon Dorcas in sudden rage. "Stealing is not a nice word."

"It is nice enough for what has happened."

"Do you know," asked Wentworth with grave deliberation, "what did happen? Has Merry ever taken you into his confidence about this transaction?"

THE OPENING NIGHT

"Merry has never said one word against you — to me."

"Then reserve your judgment until he does. If you were to ask him, and if he played fair, he would tell you that it was a straight, honest bargain, a bargain bought and paid and signed for. Merry, with all his failings, is no welcher."

"Bought and paid and signed for?" repeated the girl in slow bewilderment. "How could you buy and pay for something conceived by another man's brain and written by another man's hand."

"That is my business, wholly," answered Enoch coldly. "It is an affair no woman would understand." He paused to light another cigar; then he turned to Dorcas with such authority as he had never used to her before. "I want to say one thing before you leave this room. It is about the question of the authorship of this play. It is not to be brought up again at any time between us. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dorcas answered quietly.
"I understand it is perfectly useless to appeal to a conscience which is dead."

Enoch shrugged his shoulders. "If that is the way you choose to put it, well and good. It seems to me a pity that you cannot drop this altogether and—forget. The future looks bright for both of us. We could easily go back to our old happy life if you would."

Dorcas moved toward the door. "I cannot forget. I promise you one thing, Enoch, I will never speak of it again."

"Thank you," said the man brusquely."

CHAPTER XVI. MASTER ROBIN TULLY

HEN the curtain dropped on the last act at a Saturday matinée, Dorcas paused on the way to her dressing-room and glanced out at the stage door. Rain was lashing the street in furious, wind-blown torrents. The few people who braved the storm bent their heads against it and plodded on with determination. Nearby, a street organ was wheezing the "Miserere" in pitiful appeal to a heedless crowd at the theater door.

Dorcas returned to her dressing-room. It was a delightfully cozy retreat — Mr. Oswald had seen to that. Alice Volk sat repairing a gown.

"Where's Julie?" Dorcas demanded.

"She's asleep in our dressing-room."

The girl seated herself in front of the mirror and began to remove her make-up. At intervals she glanced over a bunch of letters which lay on the dressing table.

"I used to wonder how it would feel to be famous. Of course I am not famous yet," said Dorcas quickly; "I am merely one of the people you hear of in passing. Still, I cannot grow accustomed to the queer experience of seeing my name blazoned on every housetop when I ride on the L, or finding my picture in papers and magazines. People stop on the street to stare at me; occasionally they whisper my name to some one who is with them. A girl I went to school with wrote the other day and asked for sixteen autographed portraits to give as favors at a party. She was a rich child, and at school she snubbed me unmercifully."

"It's the way of the world," the other woman answered. "A little of it came into my own life."

"It's a queer way," Dorcas continued, "and somehow already I feel blasé. The love and trust I have from Julie and you is something worth while."

Mrs. Volk rose to hang up a gown she had been repairing. As she passed Dorcas she bent and kissed her cheek. The girl looked up with a grateful smile.

"Suppose," Dorcas suggested, "we have a little spread right here. I can order a hot dinner sent in. It's a wretched night—What do you say?"

"If I were to speak for Julie, you know how she would enjoy it."

"'Phone to the Beauclerc for a menu. It will be fun."

Half an hour later the dressing-room looked like a small banqueting hall, for the property man had put everything he controlled at their disposal.

"Listen," said Dorcas to the waiter, who stood ready to take their order; "bring us consommé, boiled salmon, celery, cucumbers, and sliced tomatoes, potatoes, string beans, roast chicken, lettuce, almond meringue pie, coffee, and — is that all?" she asked of Julie who stood peering over her shoulder.

"Ice cream and cake," suggested the child.

"Of course," cried Dorcas; "it's so long ago since I was a little girl I had forgotten that ice cream and cake is much more important than soup."

Julie turned to gaze at the table. "Isn't [217]

it a pity, Miss Dorcas, there are only three of us, when there are four sides to a table."

Dorcas laughed. "I'll let you pick out a guest for us, Julie. Who shall it be?"

"Well, let me think." The child paused. "There's Dick — Dick would do anything for us. He's only a call boy, but he's nice. Then there's Robertson. He loaned us the chairs and table. Robertson's the nicest man in the Gotham — almost. We could have had Brunton, but she's just going out. Then there's Mr. Merry. I believe," she added decisively, "I would rather have Mr. Merry than anybody."

Dorcas bent to rearrange a knife and fork. "How do you know Mr. Merry is in?"

"He is," cried Julie. "He called me into his dressing-room when I passed and gave me these." She unclasped her hand to show three caramels squeezed into a sticky lump.

"Would your mother like to have him here?"

Julie did not wait for her mother to answer.

"Of course. Mother and I love him."

"Well, you may be our messenger. Tell him he is invited to dine with three ladies. Dinner will be served in ten minutes."

Merry returned with Julie clasping his hand.

"This is unexpected! When the young lady tapped at my door, I was debating whether it was worth while going out to eat in the storm."

It was a gay little party. Dorcas ordered the waiter to set the dishes on the hot radiator, then she sent him away. Julie took his place delightedly.

"You're a clever waitress," said Merry.

"I used to plan to be a waitress when I was grown up," said the child, while she gathered plates neatly on a tray. "That was before I went on the stage. Playing the little 'Cordelia' is nicer than being a waitress."

"It means getting rich faster," said Merry gravely.

"Of course," agreed Julie. "Still, it must be delightful work to be a waitress. Before we found you, Mother and I used to go mornings to a little restaurant to get hot cakes, and I loved to watch the waitresses.

Some of them were pretty. They had lovely hair and cunning little muslin aprons."

Merry laughed. "You were wise to decide on 'Cordelia."

"I know that. I would be quite happy to be 'Cordelia' with you, even if I didn't get any money for it. Of course, though, it's lovely to get my salary envelope once a week, and to have nice rooms at Mrs. Billerwell's, and all we want to eat, and clothes and shoes. I am growing rich — I have a bank-book!"

"Really?"

"I have four hundred dollars in the bank."

"Four hundred dollars!"

"When I have two thousand I am going to buy a little house out in the country. Mother and I picked it out one day when Miss Dorcas took us driving. We will keep chickens and a pony and a cow, and have cherry trees and radishes and pansies in the garden."

"I will come and board with you," said Merry, "if I don't have to milk the cow."

"Oh, Mother," cried the child impetuously,
"I never thought of keeping boarders before!
— only we can't charge Mr. Merry much."
[220]

"May I come too?" asked Dorcas.

"Oh, that would be lovely!" Julie laid down a chicken bone she held between her fingers to clap her greasy little hands joyfully. Merry was telling a ridiculous adventure which had once befallen him on a snowbound train when he was interrupted by a timid knock at the door.

Julie rose to open it. She turned to look back at her mother with a bewildered glance. A small, odd figure stood motionless in the doorway — a little boy with serious, brown eyes. His straight, yellow hair was cropped in a fringe about his ears, then it waved upward. He wore a black suit with long, tight trousers. A round jacket, over a white shirt, reached to his waist. In his hand he held a hat like a small saucer.

"Hullo, David Copperfield, where did you come from?" cried Merry.

"That isn't my name." The child had a soft English accent. "I have heard of 'David Copperfield,' but I'm not 'David,' sir, my name is Robin Tully."

"Come in, Master Robin Tully," said Merry, "and have dinner with us."

The child stared at them steadily but did not move.

Dorcas jumped to her feet. "Oh!" she whispered, "the poor little boy is blind!"

The child stood moving his darkened eyes about as if to place her voice, then he came straight toward her, groping with both his hands. He had tucked the small, flat hat beneath one arm. Dorcas lifted him to her lap and laid his cheek against her own.

"Mother," he whispered as he dropped the hat and clasped his arms tightly about her neck.

"Dear little boy," she said softly, "I am not your mother. I wish I were."

He loosened his arms and passed his soft fingers over her face. Dorcas pillowed his cheek on her breast and whispered tender, foolish things to him between her kisses.

Merry took one of the child's hands between his own. "What is your mother's name?" he asked gently.

"At home her name is Mrs. Tully. I have a letter for her. George, who brought me here, told me to show it to somebody, and they would take me to her."

He put his hand in the inside pocket of his tight coat and drew out a smeared envelope. Merry read it aloud: "'Miss Zilla Paget, Gotham Theater."

Dorcas turned to look at Merry with unspoken pity in her eyes. "Your mother is upstairs. We will take you to her in a few minutes."

Julie crept close to Merry. She stood by his side, gazing curiously at the blind child.

"I did not know Miss Paget had a little boy," she said.

"Neither did I. Run upstairs, dear, and ask if she is in her dressing-room, but not one word to her or to any one about this boy."

Robin laid his cheek against Dorcas' face.

"I wish you were my mother," he murmured.

"You may have me as your friend." The girl kissed him softly, in response to which his chin trembled.

"Does your mother know you are coming?" asked Merry.

"No, I'm to be a surprise. George said I'm a sort of Christmas present."

Merry's eyes turned anxiously to Dorcas. He shook his head, and there was a perplexed frown upon his face.

Julie came in. "Miss Paget is not in her room. Emiline says she is out taking dinner with a gentleman."

Robin jumped to the floor and began to grope about for his hat. Merry lifted it and put it in his hand. "You must stay here till your mother comes in."

"Of course, for you are just in time for dinner," said Dorcas. "We have lots of good things left — chicken and tomatoes and ice cream."

"His shoes ought to be changed," suggested Mrs. Volk; "they're awfully wet."

"Nothing is wet but my goloshes," answered Robin. He bent to take them off. "When we left the train, George brought me here under an umbrella."

"Who was George?" asked Merry.

"George took care of me on the way over on the big ship. I slept in a little bed over his. I hope I will never see George again."

"Wasn't he kind to you?" asked Dorcas.

"Not — very kind." The child paused a [224]

moment. "I don't believe George understands little boys — blind little boys, I mean."

"Was George a relative?"

"No. He came to the home to take me to America. That was what Father Shannon said."

"What home?"

"The home for little blind boys. There were hundreds of little blind boys there."

"Haven't you any relatives?" asked Merry.

"Why, yes, I have my mother. A mother is quite a close relative, isn't she?"

"She certainly is," agreed the actor hastily.
"I mean, haven't you any other relative in England?"

"There is Aunt Fannie. She is not a real aunt, though. She used to know Mother, and sometimes she came to see me at the home."

Dorcas lifted him into a chair beside the table. Mrs. Volk set a plate in front of him. She had cut the chicken and potato into small pieces. "Can you feed yourself, dear?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Why, yes." There was a tone of grown[225]

up dignity in Robin's voice. "I have fed myself ever since I was a little boy."

There were tears in the girl's eyes while she watched him eat. He was still such a little boy! He had dainty, well-bred ways. Once he apologized as he accepted a second helping of meat.

"I could not eat on the ship today," he explained. "Things were nasty. Besides, I could not think of anything but meeting Mother. Do you think she will be in soon?"

Merry pulled out his watch. "Julie, it is half-past six. Run upstairs again and see if Miss Paget has come in. Remember, not a word about the surprise for her."

The child returned in a few minutes. "She has just come in."

Robin jumped from his chair and put on his hat.

"Oh," cried Julie, "there's ice cream. You have not had any ice cream."

"I am not hungry. I want to go to my mother. You see I have been thinking about my mother for years and years."

"Do you remember her?" asked Merry.

Robin hesitated. "Aunt Fannie says I can't because I was a little baby when she went away. I think — I remember her."

"Come with me," said Merry.

"Don't you believe that I had better take him?" said Dorcas. "Miss Paget may have begun to dress."

Merry nodded.

"Am I spick and span?" asked Robin anxiously. "Aunt Fannie said Mother is beautiful and elegant and famous. I want her to see that I am nice enough to be her little boy."

Dorcas dropped on her knees beside him. She untied the small bow at his collar and made it into a fresh knot. "Why, you will be her pride and joy."

There was a look of tense anxiety in the child's face. "Do you think so really? I am more trouble than little boys who — can see. I can't dress myself all over, and I can't part my hair straight. I can't always find things. Sometimes," Robin's voice dropped to a whisper, "sometimes I'm scared when I'm alone; I get afraid on the streets if they are noisy."

Dorcas laid her face against the soft cheek and whispered something in the child's ear. Robin's face shone with joy. "I am glad you think so. There is just one thing," his voice had a regretful tone in it. "I wish you had been my mother, I like you."

The girl held him out at arm's length for a moment. "I am wishing the same thing. I like - vou!"

He took her hand and they climbed the stair which led to the upstairs dressing-room. Dorcas felt an unspoken terror. She looked back from the head of the stairs. Merry stood watching them. She beckoned him. and he followed with a few springing steps. They paused for a moment outside the door of Miss Paget's room. When Dorcas tapped, Robin was clinging to her hand with a grip which almost hurt.

Zilla Paget stared at them with still curios-She sat in front of the mirror while the colored maid Emiline brushed her hair. It hung to her waist in long, shining waves. Her forehead wrinkled for a moment as if in perplexity. She could not see Robin's face. He was hiding behind Dorcas with his head

wrapped in her gown. A sneering smile hovered about her mouth.

"This is a rare pleasure, Miss Wentworth," she said abruptly. "Something uncommon must have happened to make you honor me with a visit. Who is your young friend?"

Dorcas laid her hand upon Robin's shoulder and turned him gently so he could face his mother.

"This is your little boy," she said in a low voice.

Zilla Paget sprang to her feet with a cry of rage. In a second she stood at Dorcas' side. She turned the child's face up to her own and stared at it. The sightless eyes seemed to plead and search for something they did not find. Robin lifted his hands and groped till he caught his mother's fingers. She flung them aside angrily.

"Don't touch me!" she cried harshly. "Take him out of my sight!"

Dorcas grew white to the lips. Robin was clutching at her in terror. She put her arm about him, sheltering him as a mother would have done.

Miss Paget turned her eyes fiercely upon [229]

the girl. "Who hatched this infernal plot?" she cried. "Who brought this little brat to America?"

The actress lost control of herself. She dashed up and down the narrow dressing-room like a caged tiger.

"What is the matter?" asked Dorcas coldly.

"It's hell and the devil—and all his angels. That's what's the matter. What right had you to stick a finger in my affairs? What do you suppose I want of that blind brat? I hate the sight of him. He is the image of his father, and good God! how I did hate him! I suppose you and your saintly Mr. Oswald are bent on ruining my career."

Dorcas opened the door and pushed the sobbing child gently into the lobby. Merry stood outside, where he had overheard the woman's shrill abuse. He took Robin by the hand and led him downstairs. Dorcas re-entered the dressing-room. Miss Paget was tossing through a heap of letters which lay on her table as if in search of something. She picked up a sheet of paper and stood

reading it. A savage smile convulsed her handsome face.

"I know now who did it," she cried.
"That was the revenge he meant, the bally old rotter! I'll get even with him!"

"You don't want your little boy, then?" asked Dorcas.

She turned on the girl in blank amazement.

"Want that blooming, batty, imbecile Rob Tully's child? Not on your life! He goes back to the asylum where he came from. I can get the law on them for giving him up without his mother's consent."

"His mother!" cried Dorcas. "You do not act the part of 'Mrs. Esterbrook'!"

There was an ugly tone in Zilla Paget's laugh. "I have heard that before. Mr. Oswald was once so complimentary as to tell me something of the sort. Now, perhaps you will be polite enough to clear out. And before you go, let me give you a bit of advice, my lady: keep your nose out of my business if you have any regard for your own happiness!"

Dorcas turned to the door. The woman laughed as she closed it behind her. She [231]

paused for a minute in the empty hall trying to think of what could be said to the child downstairs. If the woman had struck him in the face, it would have been easier to recover from such a blow.

Dick came dashing up the stair. "First call," he shouted hoarsely.

She ran down to her own room. Mrs. Volk sat in a low chair with Robin in her arms, cuddling him against her breast and crooning to him as if he were a baby. She looked up at Dorcas with pitiful eyes.

"Let me take him, Alice. I have plenty of time to dress after Julie goes out. She needs you to button her frock and fix her hair."

Robin did not speak when Alice laid him in her arms. His slender body was limp and quiet. Dorcas had never known any little boy intimately, and she did not know exactly how to comfort him. It occurred to her that if she were in Robin's place she would not want anybody to speak of what had happened. She bent down and touched his face with her lips. When the door closed and Mrs. Volk went out with Julie, he asked in a whisper,

"I don't belong then—to the—lady upstairs, do I?"

"No, dear," there was a thrill of assurance in Dorcas' voice, "no, you could not possiblv have belonged to her. Somebody made a mistake — an awful mistake."

"Then — do you know — who I do belong to?"

"Robin," asked Dorcas gently, "do you still wish that I were your mother?"

His arms clasped convulsively about her neck, and the slim body shook with sobs.

"I would like — to belong to somebody."

"Well," said the girl decisively, "I want you — forever — as my own little boy. Shall we shake hands on it?"

The small fingers were thrust into her own with a clinging grip.

That night at the close of the second act the audience sat breathless for a few moments. "Cordelia," with her face glowing beneath the rouge, turned in response to "Mrs. Esterbrook's" last plea.

"Stav with you because you are my mother? How dare you take the word 'mother' upon your lips? Do you know what that word [233]

stands for? I wonder if it would be possible to make you understand. It means love, self-denying, strong, tender devotion; it means faithful wifehood. Have you ever given that? The woman who is a good wife and mother forgives and forgets and loves. Behind it all stands love, simply love, unselfish love. I believe in God, but today I cannot understand why He should have allowed a woman such as you are to have become a wife and a mother — my mother!"

The curtain fell. Dorcas had reached her dressing-room when she had to turn and fly back to the stage. The applause had grown to a tumult. Zilla Paget stood by her side when the curtain rose. She was smiling a stage smile upon the audience, but the glance she turned upon Dorcas was one of malignant hatred.

CHAPTER XVII. WENTWORTH SHOWS HIS HAND

SWALD shut up a ledger and carried it to his safe. He and Wentworth had finished a study of their month's finances. The figures were satisfactory beyond their anticipation.

Enoch leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar. "If we can stay in New York till spring — and it begins to look as if we might — you and I are on the highroad to become millionaires."

Oswald did not answer. He picked up a paper-knife and tested its pliancy by bending it almost double.

"Wentworth," he asked, "do you happen to think of any one who could take Zilla Paget's part?"

Enoch laid his cigar on a tray and sat bolt upright. "Were you in front last night?" he asked curtly.

"No." Oswald spoke gravely.

"Miss Paget and Dorcas had nine curtain calls at the end of the second act. The gallery began to hiss. People downstairs joined in. Can you think of any actress who is free, or engaged for that matter, capable of touching her in the part?"

"It was not acting last night. Were you back of the scenes?"

Enoch brought down his fist with a thud on the table. "I was not, and I'm sorry enough that I wasn't. I would have settled things differently. I have had the whole story rehearsed to me by several people. Do you know that Miss Paget's child is in my home?"

Oswald bent his knife to the point of resistance. It snapped in two pieces. He tossed the fragments in a waste basket. "You mean the little blind boy?"

"Yes." Wentworth's voice was fierce with irritation. "I have not seen him — I have no wish to see him. Dorcas told me this morning what she had saddled herself with. She and I threshed the question out." He laughed unpleasantly. "It did precious little good."

WENTWORTH SHOWS HIS HAND

"Would you have turned the child into the street?"

Enoch shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I don't want to go over the question again. It puts me in an awkward position with Miss Paget to have the child in my house. So far as I see I cannot turn him out unless my sister goes with him."

"What do you suggest?"

"Good God! there is only one thing to do
— send the child to the asylum where he
came from. The mother is in the right when
she wants him sent back to England. He was
in a good enough home there."

"Who took him out of it?"

"I don't understand the situation. Miss Paget knows, I fancy, but she has not given me the man's name. She says it was a piece of nasty revenge."

"She told you this?"

"Yes, I have had a nice morning. It was gone over step by step at home, then again with Miss Paget. She wants the child."

"To care for?"

"No." Wentworth turned his eyes studiously in another direction. "She intends to [237]

send him back to England immediately. Why shouldn't she? The woman has to be footloose in her work. A blind youngster would tie her down neck and heels. They understand that sort in an asylum. There isn't a doubt that he would be happier there."

"That is your honest conviction?"

"I'm sure of one thing. That brat is not to be harbored in my house. Suppose the mother made it out a case of kidnaping?"

"I had not thought of it in that light."

"Well, think of it now," Enoch burst out furiously. "I am as fond of Dorcas as any brother could be, but she is the sort of girl who can't be moved when she takes a stand on anything. Miss Paget is a clever, handsome woman. I cannot be wholly at odds with her, seeing her every day of my life as I do."

"That was in my mind when I spoke of letting her go."

Enoch was on the verge of checking him with an impatient exclamation, but the Englishman interrupted. "You have had your say, now I am going to have mine. You remember one day during the early rehearsals I

WENTWORTH SHOWS HIS HAND

told you all I knew of Zilla Paget's story. I was beginning, then, to have qualms of conscience about bringing her over and setting her among decent people. She is worse than I imagined. In the most degraded woman you find brute feeling — brute motherhood I mean. She lacks that."

"Who gave you the version of this story?"

"Merry told me last night."

"You have not seen Dorcas?"

"I have not met Miss Wentworth since yesterday morning."

"It was a case of stirred-up emotion with the whole bunch of them. They will take things normally in a day or two. You had better have a talk with Miss Paget. She is anxious to see you."

"I think," Oswald spoke coldly, "it would be better for Miss Paget if she did not come to me. I might tell her in plain English my opinion of her. Hadn't we better let her go?"

"If we didn't have to take into consideration the question of a woman fit to play her part, there's her contract. It is iron-bound for the whole season. There's nothing especially heroic about Miss Paget. Get her

mad," Enoch laughed grimly, "and she'll give you trouble to burn."

"I'll look out for that myself. I'm responsible for her being here. Clean-minded citizens should not have to herd in with a — moral leper."

"That's scarcely a fit name for a lady."

Grant Oswald's voice was emphatic. "I never did class Miss Paget with — ladies."

"I might as well tell you before you go in for anything of the sort that I will fight you legally. It would be the worst sort of business proposition to drop Miss Paget in the middle of a successful run. It is not fair to her. If an actress does the work you ask of her, she has the right to make any sort of —domestic arrangement she pleases."

Wentworth's tone was conclusive. He lit his cigar again and stood silently beside his desk, blowing the smoke across the room in distinct rings. "You said you had several business matters to talk over. Is this everything for today?" He lifted his hat from the rack as if anxious to end the interview.

Oswald spoke stiffly. "I hate to think of a quarrel with you, Wentworth. I'll confess [240]

WENTWORTH SHOWS HIS HAND

I have not a great deal of fighting blood in me. We don't seem to get along as well as we did at first; I don't know whether it is your fault or mine." He paused as if waiting for Enoch to speak. Then he continued. "There was one other thing. I have been meaning to speak of it for some time. Probably others have mentioned it to you. The newspaper men are asking me one question all the time — they want to know if you are at work on another play?"

Enoch gave him a savage look. It was a look which puzzled Oswald all day long. "I will think of that when I get good and ready. The 'House of Esterbrook' is good for one season more — probably for two." Then he flung out of the office and slammed the door behind him.

Oswald sat in silence for a few minutes. His face was full of anxious perplexity. He rose, put on his hat and overcoat, and went out. In the lobby he met Zilla Paget. She turned eagerly as if to speak to him. He lifted his hat with grave courtesy and walked past her. She followed to the door and watched him while he crossed the street.

Her face flamed scarlet and she bit her lips. then she laughed contemptuously and hurried through the dark theater to the stage. The place was deserted. She went straight to the letter-rack. In the shelf marked P she found several letters for herself. She was turning away when her eye fell upon an envelope in the lower corner of the rack. She picked it out and stood for a moment staring at it blankly, then she gasped. The letter was not for her. It was addressed in coarse, shaky writing, "Mrs. Alice V. Bourne, Gotham Theater, New York." It bore the Madison Square postmark. The woman's eyes were furtively searching the gloomy theater in all directions. She did not hear a sound: nobody was in sight. She shoped the letter into her muff and ran upstairs.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE GREEN TURQUOISES

HEN," continued Dorcas, "Guleesh lifted the lady to the horse's back and leaped up before her. She put her arms about his waist and clung to him tightly. 'Rise, horse, rise,' he cried. The horse and all the hundreds of horses behind him spread out their wings and rose in the air. They went flying swiftly across the sea."

"Miss Dorcas," interrupted Robin incredulously, "I didn't know that horses could fly. I thought they trotted on the streets like this." The boy slipped down from his chair and kicked with his heels upon the floor.

"Guleesh's horse had wings — all fairy horses have wings," Dorcas laughed.

- "Did you ever see a fairy horse?"
- "I'm afraid I never did."
- "Then how do you know that it's true?"
- "Fairy stories tell us so."
- "Oh." The child's brown eyes turned [243]

to her eagerly. They were interrupted by a knock at the library door. Jason entered.

"I reckon yo'se awful busy dis arternoon, Missy?"

"Not if there is anything I can do for you, Jason."

"Emiline's downstairs. You know who Emiline is?" He paused and glanced at Robin.

Dorcas nodded.

"If 't wan't be inconveniencin' she'd like to see yo'."

"Why does she want to see me, Jason?"

"I can't tell, Missy. She's des kep' a-pleadin' en a-pleadin' fo' yo' to see her, so I tol' her, I'd ask yo'."

"I'll see her. And, Robin, suppose you go with Jason for a little while. He keeps a doughnut jar in the pantry. Make Jason tell you a story. Flying horses are nothing to the wonderful things he has seen."

Emiline entered timidly and stood waiting until Dorcas pointed to a chair. She was a neat-looking yellow girl, but there was a worried look on her good-natured face.

"Anything wrong, Emiline?" asked Dorcas.
[244]

THE GREEN TURQUOISES

"Wrong! Eberyt'ing's wrong, Mis' Wentworth. I'se lef' Miss Paget fo' good en all. Lawd, what a whack she hit me when I tol' her some t'ings I thought!"

"She struck you?" Dorcas stared at the girl in astonishment.

"'Deed, Mis' Wentworth, she struck me hard, straight 'cross my mouf wid her han'. I could take de law to her, I reckon, en git damages, but I ain't a-goin' to. I'se scared to death ob havin' anyt'ing to do wid her." The girl's face seemed to whiten, and she clasped her hands in an agony of terror. "I wouldn't wuk fo' her nohow—I'd ruther go on de streets. Mis' Wentworth, her tuqquoises am a-turnin' green!"

"What do you mean?"

Emiline spoke in a frightened whisper. "Her tuqquoises am a-turnin' green, I 'clar' fo' Gawd. dev is!"

Dorcas laughed. The octoroon's statement was so irrelevant it was almost funny.

"Lawdy, Mis' Wentworth, don' go to laughin'. I reckon yo' don' know what an awful t'ing dat is to happen. I nebber heard tell ob hit but once. Hit don' happen

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH exceptin' when a woman's ez wicked ez de ol' serpint herself!"

"Emiline, what on earth are you talking about?"

"My granny once worked fo' a wicked lady way back in slave days. I 'member hearin' her tell 'bout it when I was a little gal. Her Missis was an army lady, rich en beautiful ez could be, but she done hated her husband en der was anodder man she was sho' sot arter. Her husband, de fine ol' army man, he died sudden one night. She had er necklace on, de bluest tuqquoises yo' ebber see, en de next day dey turned green. Den dey found out she'd poisoned him. Dey would have hung her, but she drowned herself. De tuqquoises was on her neck when dey pulled her out ob de ribber—dey was green as grass."

Dorcas shivered. "Emiline, what has this to do with Miss Paget?"

The girl's eyes grew round with terror.

"She had er necklace ob de swellest tuqquoises gib her a month ago by a gemman. She's always gittin' presents fr'm gemmen. Dey was ez pale blue ez de sky when she [246],

THE GREEN TURQUOISES

got dem. She wears dem all de time, day an night. You see dem on her when she was actin'?"

Dorcas nodded.

"She nebber takes dem off. One day I tol' her dey wa'n't near ez blue ez dey used to be. She took dem to a jeweler man en had dem cleaned. Hit didn't do dem a mite ob good. Dis mornin'," Emiline paused as in terror of repeating it, "dis mornin', Mis' Wentworth, ez sho' ez Gawd made me, dem tuqquoises was turned green!"

Dorcas sat staring at her.

"I screamed when I sot my eyes on dem." The girl's teeth chattered. "She asked what was de matter, en I tol' her de story ob de ol' Colonel's Missis. Dat's when she whaled me 'cross de mouf."

"But," queried Dorcas with a puzzled frown, "what does it all mean?"

"Lawdy, dem tuqquoises would have stayed sky-blue on yo', Mis' Wentworth, er on any lady dat wa'n't doin' all dem kind ob wicked t'ings."

"Rubbish!"

"I swar to de Lawd hit's true," cried
[247]

Emiline appealingly. "I've heard my granny tell hit many a time."

Dorcas laughed. Although the story was absurd, her skin had grown chilly while Emiline talked.

"I'll tell yo'." The girl's voice grew intense. "Don' yo' 'member she had dem tuqquoises on las' night when yo' come in wid de little blind boy? Lawd, I could er choked her dead wid my own han's! She was de ol' debil hisself, en der's a judgment a-comin' on her. When yo' was gone, de t'ings she done say was curdlin' to de blood!"

"Miss Paget is not a good woman I know, but —"

"Good!" interrupted Emiline. "She didn't murder nobody den, en I reckon she ain't since, but dar was murder in her heart! En den, dis mornin'—'fore she foun' out 'bout de tuqquoises—somet'ing queer happened, somet'ing terrible queer!"

"What?"

"She come upstairs wid er bunch ob letters in her hand, right arter lunch time. She laid dem down; but befo' she done took off [248]

THE GREEN TURQUOISES

her t'ings she took anodder one out er her muff. 'Fo' she took her hat off she opened it en read it. She dropped de envelope on de floor. I saw it. Hit wa'n't addressed to her, hit was somebody else's letter." The negro girl paused irresolutely for a moment.

"Well?" queried Dorcas.

"Hit was fo' 'Mrs. Alice V. Bourne, Gotham Theater."

"'Alice V. Bourne'!" Dorcas jumped to her feet.

"Yassum." Emiline's tongue ran on excitedly. "Miss Paget, she was took wid de queerest fit yo' ebber see arter she done read it. She lay back en screeched en laughed. She got clear hystericky. Den, all of er sudden, she started to fire questions at me 'bout little Julie Bourne en Mrs. Bourne, en where dey lived en where dey come fr'm. I didn't know nuffin' but where dey lived. I went up once to Harlem wid Mrs. Bourne to help her bring some stuff ob Miss Julie's to er."

"Where did she get the letter?" asked Dorcas.

"Yo' kin search me," answered Emiline
[249]

briskly. "Dat 'oman 'ould steal er murder er any ol' t'ing."

There was a long silence. Emiline rose to go.

"Mis' Wentworth," she asked hesitatingly, "ef yo' hear ob er good place, would
yo' send fo' me? Jason, he knows where to
fin' me anytime." She paused irresolutely.
"You don' want a nurse fo' de little blind
boy, I reckon? I'se er born nurse. I like it!"

"I don't know yet, Emiline, what plans I can make, or what will be done with Robin; but I'll try to find some work for you."

CHAPTER XIX. THE IRONY OF FATE

ENTWORTH locked himself in the library one Saturday morning. Oswald, with quiet insistence, had continued the demand that he break away, go home, and begin work on another play.

"Business can be carried along without you," was his daily assurance. "'The House of Esterbrook' is good for another season, perhaps for more than one, and we ought to look ahead. I am asked every day if you are writing another play. You ought to strike while the iron is hot. The luck we are having should be an inspiration to you."

The Waverly Place house was perfectly still. Enoch seated himself before the desk, cleared off the blotter, laid out a heap of copy paper, filled the ink-well, and adjusted a new pen. He leaned his head upon his hand for a few minutes, and his listless eyes fell upon a calendar. He discovered that it bore the dates of March instead of April. He tore off

the record of weeks which had passed and dropped it into the waste basket. The pen rested listlessly between his fingers. When he tried to write with it the ink had dried. He did not dip it in the bottle again. A trail of sleepless days and nights lay behind him—he felt as if his brain had drowsed at its post.

He picked up a rubber band, twisted it about his fingers, then pulled it thin till it suddenly snapped in two. He shook himself as if in a strenuous effort to wake up. For days he had been evolving what seemed like a virile plot for a play. He tramped the streets to do his thinking and planned the scenario from beginning to end. The night before he had locked himself in his office at the Gotham and in a frenzy of haste shaped out each scene on his typewriter.

The manuscript lay at his elbow. He read it through. Suddenly he realized that the stuff fell short, of what he could not decide. It lacked reality. He compared it with Merry's drama. The story in that rose up out of the paper, each character a living, breathing man or woman. This story was dead, absolutely dead. He lifted the sheets

and deliberately tore them across, gritting his teeth while the paper zipped, as a man does when he is in pain.

He picked up a letter which lay beside him on the desk. It was addressed in Merry's irregular writing. There was nothing inside the envelope but a check for an amount in five figures. Wentworth glanced at it, then tore it across. He had sent the check to the actor without a word; it represented the entire royalties on the "House of Esterbrook." The mail brought it back to him as it had gone. A small clock ticked out the time on top of the desk. He remembered it was a Christmas gift from Merry. The ceaseless round of its second-hand fascinated him.

"It would be great if one could work as that ridiculous needle does," he thought. "It is such a lifelike thing. It goes on with a regularity that feazes a man, never pausing day or night, never dropping out or balking as we humans do when the brain goes numb. I wonder," Enoch loafed back in his chair, "I wonder if it is too late to come back. It does not seem possible that a man could undergo a physical change in a few months

while he is still hale and hearty. They say such a thing does come, though — quick as scat, when your arteries harden, or something of that sort happens. I'm forty-two. A man isn't old at forty-two, and yet — I feel old today. I suppose," he stared steadily at the face of the little clock as if it were a human countenance, "I suppose this is part of the scheme they call retribution."

He uttered the last word in an undertone as if some one were within hearing. There had been moments — especially in the dead of night — when he had longed to lav bare his soul to a father confessor. The conscience which had slept for months awoke and was raging at him like a demon. He sat silent. going over his life step by step from the day when he was confronted by temptation and fell. Dorcas had branded him as a thief. Still she had kept her word and never again questioned the authorship of the play. accusation left a welt in his soul like a stroke from the thin end of a whip. It was a welt which had not healed. He knew she had spoken the truth. He dropped his head upon his arms. It was years since he had said a

prayer. He had forgotten the form that prayer takes.

"God," he murmured, "if there is any way for me to come back—and begin again show me that way."

He did not raise his head; in an apathy he was listening curiously to a commotion in the lower part of the house. From a wrangle of voices in the hall rose the clear tones of a woman. He jumped to his feet with consternation in his eyes and flung the door open. While he stood motionless listening his fore-head wrinkled in perplexity. A cabman was carrying a trunk upstairs. It was so large that it blocked the stairway. A few steps below Jason tried in vain to pass.

"Yo' ain't got no right to tote dat trunk up dar widout Marse Wentworth's say so," cried the old negro. "I'm gwine tell him 'bout hit."

When a woman's voice from the lower hall answered, Enoch's face went pallid white.

"You dippy old black fool, I know my business. Cabby, take up that trunk as I tell you to."

Wentworth could hear Jason expostulate [255]

again. "Marse Enoch don' know you're comin'. Missy Dorcas am out en she ain't gib me no orders 'bout company."

"Missy Dorcas!" repeated the woman with a contemptuous laugh. "Get this out of your noddle straight away: I'm not company Miss Dorcas is expecting. And here's a bit of advice, — lose your doddering old jaw, then announce me to your master."

Enoch, with a few quick steps, reached the top of the stair and leaned over the balusters. The cabman glanced at his stern face, then dropped the trunk from his shoulder and steadied it on the edge of a step.

"Stay right where you are," ordered Wentworth abruptly.

He turned to the woman, who stood on the stair. She lifted her face and greeted him with a derisive laugh.

"Will you be good enough, Miss Paget, to tell me what this intrusion means?"

The Englishwoman laughed again. It was a peculiar laugh, a sweet, shrill ripple, without a ghost of merriment in it. It had a thrill as of something demoniac. She did not answer his question, but turned to the cabman.

"Take that trunk up and set it on the landing. I can't pass while you block the stair. Then go down and wait until I call you."

The man obeyed. The actress paused on the top step and looked down at Jason. "As for you," she looked at him with a sneering smile, "mind your own business now. I have announced myself to your master."

Wentworth stood with his hand upon the railing of the stair. His face was stern and there were hard lines about his mouth. He held the door of the library open.

"Come in here," he said. There was no cordiality in his welcome.

The actress brushed past him with a short, unpleasant laugh. Her manner was full of self-confidence. Wentworth realized that he had never seen her look more beautiful; still his pulses did not quicken by a beat. She wore a gown of strangely lurid blue which few women would have dared to affect. The harmony between the dead gold of her hair and a willowy blue plume that swept down from her hat was almost startling. Her attitude was aggressive and a certain sense of power lay behind her theatrical entrance.

Enoch's face settled into a frown, although his eyes were full of scowling perplexity. He rapped the door shut and turned the key in the lock.

"Now," he demanded sharply, "be good enough to tell me what this means."

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"
The woman spoke with an enticing smile.

"No. I have no intention of asking you to stay so long."

Zilla Paget laughed and sank languidly into a chair beside the fireplace.

"I would suggest that you sit down," she said suavely.

Enoch shook his head.

"You may get tired before I am through talking. It will take some time to discuss this affair."

"What affair?" Wentworth turned on her with quiet scorn. "Don't be foolish enough to try blackmail. Anything like," he paused for a moment as if trying to find a suitable word, "like sentiment for instance — or call it what you wish — died a natural death one afternoon when I tried to explain things to you. The minute a woman lets herself go and

shows the devil in her make-up at white heat, sentiment can die — die a very sudden death. Besides, I have nothing on my conscience. I treated you as generously as any man would have done under the circumstances."

Miss Paget threw back her head and laughed. "Sit down," she advised. "This is a different affair entirely. Do not flatter yourself; there is not a ghost of sentiment in this."

Enoch walked to the mantel, leaned his elbow upon it, and stared down at her. "I'll give you exactly ten minutes to explain what you want. If it is about your child, I am quite as anxious to get him out of my house as you are."

"My child! I will relieve your mind on that point immediately. It is not my child I want. If your sister wants to play fostermother, she is quite welcome to him. When I think of it," she began slowly to draw off her gloves, "Miss Wentworth has really done me a great favor."

"Oblige me then," Enoch's voice was full of cold indifference, "by getting down to business as quickly as possible. You must be gone before my sister comes in."

"Indeed." The actress looked up into his face with an insolent smile. "Why should we hurry? I want to ask you a few questions. I understand you are writing a new play." She turned to glance at the litter of manuscript on his desk. "Is there a part in it for me?"

"I have not begun to place parts yet."

"Ah!" She watched him with calm scrutiny. "How is it coming along? Will it be as big a go as 'The House' has been?"

"Is it any of your business?"

"Probably not; still, I am interested. I have been wondering," she spoke slowly, as if thinking aloud, "if it can possibly come up to the expectations of the public. A second play is often such a — rotter."

"What in thunder are you driving at?" asked Enoch fiercely.

She sprang to her feet and faced him. There was a malevolent sneer in her face.

"My opinion is that anything you could do would be a rotter."

"Why?"

Zilla Paget drew one hand from her muff and pulled out a few sheets of crumpled paper.

She laid them on the table, smoothing them carefully with the blank side up. Suddenly she turned them over and placed both her hands firmly on the paper.

Enoch took a few steps forward and peered down through his glasses. His gait grew unsteady and his fingers gripped at the edge of the table. A purplish flush swept over his cheeks, then he became ghastly pale. His very lips grew white. There were gray hollows about his eyes like the shadows which creep into a face after death. His mouth moved, but he did not utter a word, because his tongue touched dry lips.

"I knew you would understand," murmured the woman.

Wentworth's hands sprang at her wrists like the grip of a wild beast snatching at its prey.

"Don't," entreated the actress. "You hurt terribly. You do not know how strong you are. Besides — you are foolish, horridly foolish. If you should tear this, it is nothing but Exhibit A. There are hundreds of sheets where it came from. And let me tell you — they are where you won't find them."

Wentworth unclasped her wrists, but his eves were blazing with murderous furv. turned with a quick gesture to the wall behind him. Against a rug of Oriental matting hung a collection of savage weapons. The woman watched him with cool unconcern. He seemed to be searching rapidly with his eyes for something. He laid his hand upon a long thin dagger. Here and there its blade had rusted to blackness, but its edge was deadly keen. He jabbed the point of it into his blotting pad. It curled over lithely, as a Ferrara does. Then he glanced at the woman beside the table. His eyes were glittering with the bloodthirsty passions of the primitive man.

Zilla Paget lifted a lorgnette which hung at her wrist by a jeweled chain. She clicked it open, raised it to her eyes — and laughed.

"I wonder," she murmured, "if you realize how ridiculous you look. You are too whitelivered to do such a thing as that. Besides," she glanced about the sunlit room, "where could you hide the body?"

Enoch tossed the blade upon his desk and began to walk up and down the floor. He

rolled his handkerchief into a hard ball and dabbed with it continually at his moist forehead. The woman sat perfectly still. She turned to fold the sheets of paper, then she laid one hand upon them and lay back gracefully in her chair.

Wentworth turned on her with a sudden question. "How much do you want for — Exhibit A and the rest of the evidence?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no intention of selling it."

"Then what's your price?" Enoch's question snapped like a pistol shot.

She looked up at him with a derisive smile.

"My price is ridiculously small, much less than it is worth. I am merely coming here to live."

"You are coming here — to live? Here — in the house — with my sister?"

"Here — in the house — with your sister," she repeated mockingly. "Exactly. I have taken a fancy to this part of the city. It is rather attractive for New York. I think I shall enjoy the society of your — sister. You will not find me a troublesome guest. I can fit in happily to your home circle.

Part of my luggage is there in the hall, you know. The rest is downstairs."

A wave of scarlet swept over Enoch's face.

"To think of Merry squaring up through—you. It's the most infernal scheme ever concocted."

"That's a bally bad guess of yours. Merry does not come into this at all."

"Where did you get these?" Enoch spoke fiercely and pointed to the sheets of paper that lay under her hand.

"It's rather an unusual story. Sit down and I'll tell it to you. If you are searching for a plot for that new play of yours, you might find this worth while."

Wentworth threw himself into the chair in front of his desk and wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Did you ever hear of George Volk?" asked Miss Paget.

Enoch's forehead corrugated into a puzzled frown.

"I met him in London seven years ago," she continued, "and I was such a bally fool I married him. In those days he was a heroic-

looking figure. If you saw him as he is today you might say I had showed poor taste."

Wentworth sat staring at her with sullen curiosity.

"I have found out that he is in New York and that ten years ago he had been married here. Also that his wife and child are alive. Interesting situation, isn't it? Bigamy releases a woman, though I had not felt terribly fettered. I have George Volk to thank for bringing that brat across. It was one of his masterly little schemes of revenge. Then, in a curious way, I learned that Volk's wife is the woman you call Alice Bourne. He laid a scheme to get money out of her yesterday. I got a detective and planned to face him when he reached his wife."

"What the devil has Volk and your matrimonial affairs to do with that?" Wentworth pointed to the sheets of paper beside her on the table.

"Don't be in such a blooming hurry. I tell you the situation is dramatic. I went to the house where Alice Volk lives in Harlem — oh, I was disguised, I tell you; you would never have known me. The detective got in first [265]

and opened the area door. I slipped in and waited. He was to give me a signal when Volk arrived. A servant came clumping down the cellar stairs after coal. I hid in a closet where they store trash and — waste paper."

Enoch's eyes narrowed and a yellow pallor crept over his face. "Curse it!" He spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, curse it!" repeated Zilla Paget with an amused laugh. "My word! it was a blooming queer accident! I closed the door, the latch caught and I couldn't get out. There I was, locked in that beastly hole. I struck a match. It was lucky I had a match-box along. Then I found an electric light. The first thing my eyes lit on among that waste was a sheet of paper. I picked it up. I had seen the writing before."

"Whose was it?" stammered Wentworth.
"Whose was it? Don't put up that bluff
on me," cried the actress scornfully. "It was
Merry's, of course. You recognized it in a
second. It was the last speech I make in the
second act — as it used to be — before you,
the author, changed it."

"Well," cried Enoch fiercely. The woman paused and turned to him with an amused smile.

"I had forgotten about George Volk. He never showed up. He does not count anyway. I found the whole play in that closet."

"Then what did you do?" Enoch's face was full of hatred and defiance. His eyes flamed with the tumult of an animal at bay.

"There was only one thing to do." Zilla Paget lay back in the chair and smoothed the chinchilla of her muff caressingly. "Of course I brought it away with me, every scrap of it. You would not have let such a valuable asset get into the hands of a dustman, would you? There are only two pages missing. Do you care to see it?"

"Damn you, no! I have no wish to see it," snarled Wentworth.

"Any fool can tell at a glance it is a first draft. Merry must have written like mad. There is hardly a change in it. Except for my own rôle, every line stands almost as it was written."

Enoch suddenly leaned forward in his [267]

chair. "You think you've got the strangle hold on me?"

Miss Paget laughed triumphantly. "The strangle hold! You Americans have such jolly strong words! That's great — the strangle hold."

She rose and folded the pages of manuscript, put them in her bag, then she drew off her coat and hung it on the chair behind her. She lifted a gold case from the pocket, picked out a cigarette, and scratching a match lit it, blowing a delicate ring of smoke across the room. It flitted into Wentworth's face.

"I always knew," she bent over to drop a fleck of ashes on a tray beside her, "or rather I have guessed for a long time, that you did not write 'The House of Esterbrook.'"

"What gave you that impression?"

"For one thing, everybody tells how you and Merry were friends once — Castor and Pollux sort of guys, don't you know. You hate each other now. An owl could see that with its eyes shut."

"If you ever left the stage you could make big money in the detective business." Enoch laughed harshly.

"Perhaps," she acceded. "Then I have rehearsed too many plays not to know the author when I bump into him. I knew months ago that Merry wrote 'The House,' but I could not prove it. You haven't got it in you to do that sort of work."

"Thank you." Enoch laughed unsteadily.

"Here's the whole situation. If Miss Wentworth and you do not fancy having me here as a — guest, no better word than that occurs to me now, Grant Oswald might be interested; at least he might insist on paying the royalties to the — author. Or, I could get a fancy price for the story from a New York paper. I am told they pay tremendously on this side for a ripping sensation. This would make one, don't you say so yourself?"

"My God!" Enoch stared at her with desperate eyes.

Miss Paget rose, unpinned her hat and tossed it upon the table. She stood surveying Wentworth with a gleam of amusement in her eyes. Then she crossed the room and leaned out at the window. "Hi, there, Cabby," she called, "wake up. Bring in the rest of that luggage."

CHAPTER XX. A Break in the Waverly Place Home

HERE is another bit of baggage."

Dorcas spoke to the cabman, who stood beside a carriage in front of the Waverly Place house. He lifted little Robin and set him on a seat with a grip beside him. Dorcas paused with her hand on the carriage door.

"Wait," she ordered, as the man turned to go in the house; "here comes Jason with a valise."

The cabman lifted it from the hands of the old negro and swung it up on the front seat.

"Jason," said the girl, beckoning to him as she ran up the steps of the house. The servant followed her. They stood under the dull gleam of a lamp in the vestibule. She laid her fingers on the knob of the inside door and held it as one does when in fear of an intruder. "Jason," she repeated, "I want to talk with you for a minute."

WAVERLY PLACE HOME

"Yes, Missy." There was a tremor in the old negro's voice.

Dorcas stood gazing at him steadily, although a quiver in her chin belied the bravery.

"Jason, don't ask me again to take you with me," she pleaded. "If you do I shall weaken. I do not know where I am going myself. I have nowhere to take you. I shall miss you terribly, you understand that. But you must stay here and look after Enoch and the house and everything. You are needed here as you never were in your life before."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, take me wid yo', Missy. I'll sleep anywhar. A corner in a celler 'll do fo' me."

"Uncle Jason, do you remember the story you have told me about Mother leaving you to care for Enoch and me? Sometimes I think of that day. You wheeled Mother out on the piazza where the locust trees were in bloom, and I almost believe that you did not tell me, but that I remember it myself."

"Yes, honey." The tears rolled down the negro's wrinkled face. "She called to Lucy to bring yo' out. Yo' wan't nuffin but er [271]

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH little pink face en two doubled-up fists dat wan't ez big ez a cotton blossom."

The old man paused to wipe his eyes with a red bandanna handkerchief.

"And she said?" continued Dorcas. The girl was trying to smile.

"She said, 'Promise me, Jason, ez long ez yo' lives, to care fo' my baby, my sweet little gal baby, she'll never remember she saw her mother. Take care ob her, Jason, ez if de Lawd hisself had gib her in yo' charge.' I promised, honey," the husky voice died away in a sob; "I called de Lawd to witness right thar dat I'd look out fo' yo' all my life, ez well ez an ol' darky could do."

"You have done it, Uncle Jason."

Dorcas took the sooty hand between her palms. "If Mother could know how faithfully you have filled your promise — and somehow I feel, Uncle Jason, that she does know — she would say that you have the whitest soul God ever put into a black body."

"Oh Lawdy, Missy, can't I come wid yo'? I don' need no money. Yo' needn't pay fo' me anywhar —"

"Jason, you blessed old saint, it isn't money
[272]

WAVERLY PLACE HOME

I am considering. I have plenty of money. Mother left Enoch in your care as much as she did me. You have told me that."

The negro bowed his head solemnly.

"Won't you stay with him?"

Jason pointed to the inner door of the vestibule. "Honey, what's a-goin' to happen? Do yo' reckon dat Marse Enoch's a-goin' to marry dat — pusson?"

"Jason, I don't know. Only you must stay here."

"I will." The old servant spoke with slow impressiveness. "'Fore de Lawd, I will, Missy."

She ran down the steps. Jason followed to close the carriage door when she entered. As they moved away, Dorcas leaned out to glance at the home which had been hers since schooldays ended. She caught a glimpse of Enoch through the dusk. He was leaning from the library window. The room behind him gleamed white with a blaze of electricity. Before the mantel mirror stood a woman. Her arms reached above her head to pin back waves of shining yellow hair.

The cabman pulled up his horses and looked [273]

THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH through a window in the roof. "You didn't tell me, lady, where you want to go."

"Drive me to the Gotham Theater," said Dorcas; "then I wish you to take this little boy to Harlem."

CHAPTER XXI. AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

HAT night, when the curtain fell upon the third act, Dorcas turned eagerly to Merry. "You are my friend?" she whispered.

"Miss Dorcas," the actor's voice was profoundly grave, but his eyes smiled, "I would bestride the whirlwind or set my foot upon a cyclone for you."

The girl lifted her eyes with a swift glance. She remembered the line—it was one the actor used to speak in "The King at Large."

"I believe you would." Her voice was low and impetuous. "I need a friend, a strong, patient, wise friend, as I never did in my life before."

"Miss Dorcas, you make me wish this moment that I were a Samson and a Solomon. I am not strong or very wise, but I am patient, and there is no task upon God's earth that I would not try to do for you. You believe me, don't you?"

The crimson blood flushed into her face.
[275]

"Yes." Her voice was scarcely audible. The curtain began to ascend for an encore. "Come to Mrs. Billerwell's tomorrow night. I am going there to stay with Alice over Sunday. I need your help."

He regarded her curiously for a moment. "I will come," he answered gravely. Then he took her hand and led her down to the footlights.

On Sunday evening Dorcas sat staring down into a crowded street of Harlem. Under the vivid glare of electricity the city looked sordidly ugly. It was a strange contrast to her own home. The house at Waverly Place had retained much of its stately old-time dignity and its outlook upon the tree-shaded square was quiet and pleasant. Upon Harlem's sidewalk throngs of children romped and shrieked in the midst of a city's din. balmy wind had been blowing all day long and had driven a wintry chill from the air. Knots of women sat talking on doorsteps or they leaned out to gossip from adjacent windows. It was the hour for Sunday night suppers and a rush of business had begun in delicatessen stores. Strange odors crept in [276]

AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

at the open window, a blend of garlic with stewed meats, pungent pickles, and cosmopolitan cheeses.

A gilt clock on the mantel struck seven. Dorcas rose, opened the door, and stood listening. On the lower floor she heard a door slam. She was trying to separate insistent noises of the street from everyday household bustle. She heard Mrs. Billerwell give an order to a servant, then Julie laughed merrily, and a light footstep sounded on the stair. On the other side of the wall a servant was preparing a room for her. She heard the girl slam down a window and begin to move furniture about, while castors squeaked rebelliously. Then she fell to sweeping, and Dorcas counted absently each quick scuff of Once the maid dropped it and the broom. the stick fell on the floor with a startling rap. Occasionally her dragging footsteps clattered across a bit of bare floor or she paused to thump the pillows vigorously. Dorcas was roused from her reverie by the imperative call of the telephone. She listened while Mrs. Billerwell answered it. Then the doorbell rang and she heard Merry's voice. She

began to grope about the dim room in search of matches to light the gas. She was still in darkness when he tapped at the door.

Andrew seated himself in a shadowy corner beside the window. A glimmer of light from a street lamp fell upon the girl's face. In her eyes was an appealing loneliness which he had never seen there before.

"Miss Dorcas," he began with grave gentleness, "what can I do for you? You know me fairly well. There is nothing heroic about me. I doubt if I could fight a duel. It makes me shiver even to touch a pistol — but I am ready to stand up to be shot at if it will make things easier for you."

"I believe you would," said Dorcas with an unsteady laugh.

"I swear I would," he assured her with simple gravity. The girl felt deeply moved.

"There will not be any shooting, and I don't know exactly what you can do for me. I don't even know what to ask you to do. I thought of turning to Mr. Oswald at first. I didn't. I felt I could come to you more easily."

"Thank you for saying that." An eager [278]

AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

happiness flushed into the man's face which seemed to warm each feature beneath the surface.

Dorcas stood before him trembling and irresolute. "It is so hard,—loving my brother as I do — to sit in judgment on him or to discuss him, even with you. You love Enoch, or rather — you did once?" she asked quickly.

Merry nodded.

"Since things went wrong between you," Dorcas hesitated for a moment, "since that time he has changed; you cannot realize how he has changed. Still, we were together and alone, and I kept thinking that the old happy days would come back."

She stopped short and Merry's brows wrinkled into lines of perplexity. "What has happened? What can I do to help you?"

"Yesterday," she began hurriedly, "when I went home after the matinée, Jason stood waiting in the vestibule for me. He did not say a word, but I knew that something had happened. I pushed him aside and ran upstairs. I could think of nothing but that Enoch had been taken ill. As I passed the hall rack I noticed the queer blue umbrella [279]

Miss Paget carries. It has a tiger's head for a handle—you remember it? Even in my anxiety I thought how strange it should be there. When I reached the library she sat beside the fire, reading a magazine."

"Where was Enoch?"

"In his little study, with the door locked. He came out when she began to talk to me."

"What did she want?"

"Andrew," the tears sprang to the girl's eyes, "that woman has come to live in our home."

"To—live—in—your—home!" Merry's voice had an incredulous tone in it. "Enoch has not—married Zilla Paget?"

"I do not know. I cannot understand. I think that Enoch hates her."

"Then why is she there?"

"I do not know."

"He didn't explain?"

"No. He looked like a thundercloud. She talked. She said she had come to live in our house. Her clothes were unpacked. She has taken the spare room. Her things, a lorgnette, and a scarf and gloves were scattered about the library.

1 082 1

AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

"Enoch must be - insane!"

"Oh!" cried Dorcas. Sudden horror flashed into her face. "Oh! you don't think — that?"

"No. I'm a beast to have frightened you. It is not that. Enoch is as sane as you are."

"Then what has changed him?" Her eyes searched his face with a piteous scrutiny. "You know. Won't you tell me?"

"I think it is —" The man hesitated for a word which would not hurt. "Yes, he has changed. He is not the same old Enoch. I cannot account for this. He promised me faithfully to drop her — for keeps."

"When?"

"Months ago. He has kept his promise until now. I know he has. The strange part of it is, the woman herself hates him. She says vile things about him."

"To you?"

"No, not to me!" cried Merry quickly. "She never speaks to me. We have reached the freezing-point in our acquaintance."

Dorcas rose and walked to the window with her hands clasped tightly together. Through her brain surged a few lines of poetry like a weary iteration:

Where the brook and river meet, Womanhood and childhood fleet.

She had crossed with one step the brook which led straight to womanhood. There were grave questions to be decided and burdens to be lifted—strange, unaccustomed burdens. She began to speak in a strange, toneless voice.

"I don't know what I am going to do. Ever since I was a little girl there was Enoch. I never had anybody else belonging to me, only I never missed them, for I had him."

She stretched out her hands as a child might have done and raised her face to the man beside her as if in appeal for help and guidance. He took her fingers between his own with a swift grasp, caught her in his arms, and kissed her.

"Dorcas, tell me, tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

Their eyes met, and the girl understood. A bewildering happiness which transfigured life throbbed through her heart and body. Merry's face was luminous, his eyes shone, he seemed transfigured, in one abrupt moment,

AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

from a listless visionary to a man—alive with manly vitality.

Dorcas heard the moments ticked out by the little gilt clock on the mantel. Time did not count. The world had changed. She realized what happiness meant, a happiness which closed a door upon every intolerant thing in the world. She remembered how in the play she had simulated, night after night, the joy of a woman as she met her lover. She had spent days in working up that semblance of radiant gladness. She had played the scene many times to an outburst of applause, now she smiled, it seemed so pale and ineffectual to her today.

Andrew put his fingers under her chin, raised her face, and looked into her eyes.

"Dearest," he asked, "are you sure — sure that you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Listen, don't answer for a minute. I want you to understand. I would not be satisfied unless I have everything. I want you to trust me, to believe in me, and to love me as a woman like you could love a man. One night, months ago, I had it in my heart

to ask you this. That night I felt like a man who, lonely and cold, tramps through the streets of a city looking into firelit, happy homes. That night I wanted your love, your faith — yourself. You know the night I mean, when you pulled me out of hell and set my feet on the high road. Then you might have given me pity, perhaps —"

Dorcas interrupted him. She put up her hand and pushed aside the lock of hair which had strayed over his forehead.

"I do not think, then, it would have been pity — alone," she confessed.

He took her in his arms again. "A man ought to have pride and manliness enough," he said passionately, "to want his wife to love him without one touch of pity. And yet, I have wanted you so — it seems to me I have wanted you so long. I have not a host of friends, like some men. I am lonely. Life has been so empty for me. I want a home, where a wife is waiting to welcome me — and little children, dear." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "You would think me a foolish fellow if I confessed the dreams I have had. I have dreamed of you opening

AN EVERYDAY MIRACLE

the door of our home, of you coming to meet me with a smile and outstretched arms. I have dreamed of feeling your kiss upon my lips, of holding you close to my heart as I do now. I have been dreaming foolish dreams like these," he laughed tremulously, "since that night in November, and I have scarcely dared to hope that you even believed in me."

Dorcas smiled into his eyes. "I have always believed in you. I never lost faith in you or in your genius for one moment. And," she paused as if making confession, "I have loved you for a long time, ever since that night, the same night, when you came back and I was so happy."

"That night," said Andrew, "was the miracle moment of my life."

"Was it so wonderful as that?" she whispered.

"When I think, dearest, of what you have stood for to me, it is a miracle."

"It is an everyday miracle!"

"There are no everyday miracles," said Merry. Then he kissed her again.

She turned away from him to stare out at the window again. On the sidewalks the rush [285]

of city life still went on tumultuously. Half an hour before she had thought the street sordid and ugly. It had changed. The street lights, now clear and white, were circled about by lovely halos. The voices of the children were sweeter and gentler. Next door the servant, who was still at work, sang a lilting Irish ballad. Through it ran a constant iteration of "My own sweet lad."

"Dorcas," Merry spoke hesitatingly, "you said you trusted me?"

"I do." The girl raised her head with a quick gesture.

"I cannot explain now," he began. "I cannot ask you to be my wife until something which looks like an utter tangle has been straightened out. Can you go on trusting, even if I cannot explain?"

"Yes," Dorcas laughed. "I can go on trusting you indefinitely."

"Don't," he cried, "don't say — indefinitely. I want you now, darling, and — forever."

CHAPTER XXII. From the Top Gallery

N the same night that Zilla Paget took up her residence in the Wentworth home Grant Oswald sat beside his desk, dictating letters to his secretary. He listened while the tinkle of the overture ceased.

"Has Mr. Wentworth come in yet?" he asked when an usher entered with a telegram.

"No, sir; we're watching for him. Nobody has seen him."

"Ask him to come here as soon as he arrives."

None of the employees of the Gotham recognized a man beside the stair of the upper gallery, where a steep iron railing jutted out upon the side street. The rain fell softly and he was muffled to the chin in a drab overcoat. A felt hat was drawn over his eyes. He emerged suddenly from the shadow to lay his hand upon the arm of a boy who went springing up the grated stair.

"Here, do you want to sell your ticket for a dollar?" he asked.

"Sure," cried the boy emphatically. "Say, mister, why don't ye buy one fer yerself? They're fifty cents, if ye git in line at the window."

"I don't want to stand in line."

The boy thrust the slip of pasteboard into Wentworth's hand, seized the money, and fled to take his place at the end of the line which straggled round the corner from Broadway.

Enoch waited until a throng began to press its way up the steps. He pulled his hat down close about his forehead and the rim fell to his eyes. When he reached out his hand to the attendant at the door, the man did not look at him; he was trying to stem a tide of human beings and make certain that each one had paid his way.

Wentworth moved inside the door and glanced at the gray coupon, then he passed to an end seat in the third row. He laid his hat upon the floor, pulled off his damp coat, and waited for the curtain to rise. Although the clatter of voices about him was insistent,

FROM THE TOP GALLERY

he heard them like a dull jargon. Once he rose to allow two girls with their escorts to pass, then seated himself again with his body hunched forward, watching the musicians clamber through a low door below the stage. The leader lifted his baton and the overture began. A man who pushed unceremoniously past aroused Enoch from his listless mood. He turned and stared at a girl who sat beside him. The lines on her wan face were etched, not by the years she had lived, but by a girlhood spent in airless places amid the roar of machinery.

He sat watching her with an impassive stare. A dreamy look crept into her face. The orchestra began to play an inconsequential thing in which there was the trip of dancing feet and a sway of lithe bodies. He could see the lines smoothing out in her careworn face. Her ungloved fingers beat time to the music with perfect rhythm. Then her hand went out in an unconscious caress to the thin, shabby lad who sat beside her. He clasped it and turned to her with an eager smile. Wentworth sighed.

The curtain rose. People who sat close [289]

under the roof listened with a tense stillness, which was never disturbed by the rustle that occasionally ran through the orchestra. The story of the play had grown old, threadbare, and uninteresting to Wentworth, but it moved these men and women to the quick. During the first act the girl beside him turned to her sweetheart and spoke in a tremulous whisper: "She's a cruel devil!"

Her eyes were bent with hatred and scorn upon Zilla Paget, who stood looking down at Merry. His guilt had been discovered. He sat beside a table with his face hidden in his outstretched arms, while the wife hurled upon him a torrent of bitter contumely. Once his body shook with a half-stifled sob. Little Julie clasped his hand, but her terrified eyes were turned upon the mother. Wentworth had seen the woman in a towering passion; now she threw herself into the fury of her rôle as she had done in real life, pacing the floor like a caged tiger. She paused at Merry's side half exhausted.

"Think of the child," he pleaded miserably.

"The child — to perdition with the child!"

Into Enoch's memory leaped a scene long
[290]

FROM THE TOP GALLERY

forgotten. Upon the edge of a battlefield, after a bloody encounter, he had once been pressed into hospital service. Anesthetics were not at hand and he had helped by main strength to hold a mutilated soldier while the surgeon amputated a shattered bone. The agony of a groan, which the man tried to stifle, haunted Wentworth for months. Some time in his life Merry must have heard such a sound and was repeating it. Then the woman upon the stage laughed.

"Damn her!" whispered the lad, who sat holding the girl's hand.

Wentworth smiled absently. He watched Dorcas make her entrance. Something stately and high-mettled, like an unconscious hauteur, had been added to the dignity which was his sister's great charm. This dignity constantly put Zilla Paget at a disadvantage; she was coarsened by it, brutalized, and cheapened to a degree. The contrast dawned quickly on a gallery audience.

"Ain't Miss Wentworth sweet?" whispered the girl by his side.

"Sweet?" repeated her escort. "She's a peg higher 'n sweet. She's game, game clear to [291]

the spine. The peroxide liddy's a bruiser. I'm aching to bat her in the snoot."

"You hold your hands off her, Charley," answered the factory girl with a giggle. "She could lay out your runty little carcass with one swipe."

Enoch stared at the rest of the play through moody eyes. When the curtain fell on the second act Zilla Paget appeared on the stage alone to meet uproarious applause mingled with ieers and hissing. Wentworth gripped the arm of his chair as he watched her sweep the house with a triumphant gaze. A brand of hate which has the red of murder in it tore at his heart. He rose, tossed his coat across his arm, groped beneath the chair for his hat, then he slammed down the seat and went out. On the stair he met an usher.

"Mr. Wentworth," cried the boy, "I've been looking everywhere for you. Oswald wants to see you in his office about some bookings."

Enoch descended without answering him. He paused once to push his arms into his coat. but he did not enter the office; instead, he turned and walked down Broadway. The [292]

FROM THE TOP GALLERY

rain had ceased, the sky was clear, and the stars were shining. He tramped on heedlessly. He realized suddenly that he was far down town in the business heart of the city. Overhead hung the sign of an old-fashioned hotel. He opened the swinging doors and walked to the desk.

- "I want a room," he said peremptorily.
- "What price?" asked the clerk.
- "I don't give a damn about price. I want a room where it is quiet, where there is a good bed, and where I can sleep as if — as if I were dead."

CHAPTER XXIII. FACING THE SITUATION

NOCH had never been a drinking man. The sight of drunkenness had frequently aroused in him a species of stomachic revolt: therefore mere physical repulsion had done much to keep him from one form of debauchery. During the days of utter desolation that followed his sister's departure he turned to whisky as the sufferer from insomnia seeks relief in an opiate. It did not bring ease, however, either of body or mind. He went about in a dull, halfsickened stupor, hating himself and the world. One night, in a lonely room of the hotel where he had taken refuge, he sat in the darkness for hours thinking; then like a flash he saw himself. It seemed to him that for a second a shutter — somewhere, perhaps in remote lobe of his brain — had flashed open and he saw not only his present condition. It was not a pleasant but his future. phantom.

FACING THE SITUATION

A half-empty bottle of whisky stood at his elbow. He stared at it for a minute with a scowl, as if it were an actual enemy. A feeling of nausea crept over him. He lifted it, carried it to the wash-bowl, and poured the liquor down the drain-pipe. Then he laid the empty bottle on a tray and set it outside the door. He filled his pipe with tobacco. pulled a chair to the window, sat down, and stared at the lights of the city. He fell into one of his introspective moods. He began to trace backward every step he had taken since the day he exacted the forfeit of Merry's bond. He felt like a vessel which had slipped its moorings and had been unmercifully buffeted by one tempest after another. Each one had done its work so ruthlessly that he was a human derelict left swamped and scuttled. The phrase "a human derelict" stuck obstinately in his brain; it described him vividly. Already he had had more than his deserts. The vengeance of Zilla Paget was the last straw. The woman's image flashed before his eyes: he heard her satanic laugh and saw a fleeting vision of her picturesque golden-haired loveliness as

he had slammed the door and left his home.

Wentworth gritted his teeth savagely, then he looked at his watch. It was close to mid-He went downstairs, paid his bill. ordered a carriage, and drove to the Waverly Place house. As he stood fitting the key noiselessly into the lock his heart beat tumultuously for a second or two. He opened the door stealthily and passed through the vestibule. The house was still and a lamp burned dimly in the hall, as Jason always left it until his master returned. He hung his hat on the rack, stole upstairs to his own room. switched on the electricity, and glanced about. He locked the door and undressed swiftly. Ten minutes later he was sleeping the deathlike sleep which follows complete exhaustion of brain and body.

He did not wake till noon. Jason answered his ring. The old negro entered with hesitating steps.

"Good morning," said his master. "Jason, do you know how a guest lives in a hotel when he wants to be alone, absolutely alone? He eats in his own room, his mail is brought to [296]

FACING THE SITUATION

him, he goes and comes without a word being spoken to him by anyone in the house. You understand?"

"Yassir."

"I wish to have that sort of service in my home until — your mistress returns. If it is necessary, engage another servant to look after your duties. I want you to wait on me exactly as I have explained. You can do it, Jason?"

"I'll be mighty glad to do hit, Marse Enoch."

Wentworth returned to the theater and took up his duties as if nothing had happened. His associates greeted him with their usual courtesy; still he felt as if a drop curtain had fallen between him and the world where his daily labor lay. Women and a few men shrank away from him even while they seemed trying to be polite, sometimes kind.

Zilla Paget made no secret of her change of residence. She flaunted the news of it abroad and Wentworth's lapse from the conventionalities of life made a nine-days gossip in theatrical circles. It even agitated moralities which had been esteemed lenient.

The reason back of the intensity of feeling was not, in every case, shocked virtue. but Dorcas was loved, while the Englishwoman was held in universal contempt and hatred.

Curiosity threw out its dragnet among the people in the company, who watched Wentworth go and come among them day after day, treating Miss Paget with an aversion which was colder than anything doled out to her by the players at the Gotham.

"I tell you, it's a pose with Wentworth," said John Breen, the man who played the ianitor.

"Pose nothing," answered his wife scornfully. "Wentworth hates Paget worse than any of us do, and that is going some. watched them together. She knows he hates her, even if she is living alone with him under the same roof. He's afraid of her. I've seen it in his eyes when he didn't know anybody was watching. If I don't miss my guess there's blackmail or something like that back of it. She's fit for it. Wentworth's a goat in some way that we're not on to."

It was several days after his return to business before Enoch met his sister. [298]

FACING THE SITUATION

heard in a casual way that she had rented an apartment and had taken Alice Volk with the two children to live with her. Their first encounter was an ordeal to each one. They came face to face in the foyer. Enoch said "Good morning" and held out his hand. The girl held it for a second, looking up into his face with eager wistfulness. The ghost of a smile broke over Enoch's haggard face, then he glanced backward as the glass door behind him slammed, and Zilla Paget came rustling in.

He turned brusquely and entered his office. The jaded look in his eyes had changed to shuddering hate. Dorcas passed out to join the throng on Broadway. She felt chilled and lonely. She did not even realize that the sun was shining.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

LL I have left to say, Wentworth, is this—we have come a crossroad and you must between two paths: either cut that woman out of your life or don't expect to take your place among decent citizens."

There was a look of discomfort and anxiety in Grant Oswald's pale, high-bred face while he spoke, although his voice was emphatic. Enoch did not answer. He moved restlessly in his chair once or twice, lifted a program that lay on his desk, and ran his eyes through its pages. Oswald paused as if waiting for a reply.

can't understand your infatuation, Wentworth," he went on; "the woman degenerates every day of her life. God knows," a bitter tone crept into his voice, "I feel culpable for ever bringing her across the ocean. Then I ought to have let her go when [300]

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

I spoke of it a month or two ago. She was bound to do mischief, only I never dreamed that you would fall into her clutches. I warned you."

Enoch sat in sullen stillness, with his eyes fixed on a calendar which hung above the desk.

"I wish." Oswald's tone was almost wistful, "that you would at least talk it over. I think I can deal with the woman if anyone can. I have always treated her with a certain stand-offishness that she resents. She has tried, more than once, to cross the line I drew. She didn't succeed, and it galls her. I never put into words what I think of her. She understands, however, that I recognize her value dramatically, while personally — to me — she is offensive. If she has you in her power, won't you tell me? It would never go beyond these walls. She knows that I know her story. Low as she has sunk, she realizes that it is not what the world would call a creditable story. I can handle her easily."

A gleam of relief and hope drifted for a moment across Wentworth's face. Then he

laughed nervously and the sullen frown returned to his eyes. He rose and began to pace the office floor with nervous footsteps.

"Won't you trust me?" pleaded Oswald. "I have a real regard, Wentworth, for you as well as for your genius. I would do it for your sister, if for no other reason. There is time enough yet to pull away, but," he spoke abruptly, "it won't be long. The woman has dragged more than one man to the gutter or to — suicide."

Wentworth laughed disagreeably. "Well, it won't be suicide," he answered harshly.

"Don't be too sure. When a man who has always had a fair amount of self-respect begins to lose it, he usually faces two alternatives; that is, unless he has a solid anchor in his home."

Enoch lit a cigar and began to smoke.

"Evidently it is useless to talk. What passes my understanding is how any man can turn out a woman like your sister to give shelter to Zilla Paget. I hate to say it, Wentworth, you will set me down as a cad, but I prefer to have a separate office. I am

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

willing to take the little back room, or you can. One suits me as well as the other."

"Certainly." Wentworth leaped to his feet alertly. "I'll change at once. I'd hate to thrust my society upon anyone who does not care for it."

"It is not your society I mean wholly. I object to Miss Paget dropping in here as she did today. Don't hurry, I did not mean that—"

"I don't care what you meant. I can make the change at once." Enoch's voice was churlish. He began to drag volumes from the bookcase beside him and heap them upon the top of his desk. "You made yourself tolerably plain, don't spoil it with politeness."

He pulled the papers from pigeonholes in his desk and tossed them about in loose piles, dropping some in the waste basket and bundling others together with rubber bands.

Oswald's pen was traveling slowly across a sheet of paper when some one tapped softly at the door. Merry entered. Enoch did not turn his head. The actor seated himself beside Oswald's desk.

"I could not show up this morning when you 'phoned," he explained. "I have been arranging for a funeral. It's one of those funerals which have no great string of carriages."

"Who's dead?"

"George Volk."

Oswald laid down his pen and stared at Merry. "George Volk! When did he drift back to America?"

"Nobody seems to know anything about him. It's a mercy though; it sets Alice free."

"How did she take it?" asked the Englishman quickly.

"I haven't told her yet."

"Where did he die? The last time you heard of him was in England, wasn't it?"

"Yes. This morning I came to the theater to get a letter I left in my dressing-room and ran into a policeman who was looking for Alice Volk. I asked what he wanted. They found a letter addressed to her on a man who was killed last night down near the bridge. I've been with the officer since ten o'clock."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. I've looked after everything. But [304]

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

I want your advice on one point. What do you think of not telling her—till he is buried?"

"It's the best plan. I suppose he had fallen pretty low."

"Low!" Merry shrugged his shoulders. "I did not know such dives existed as the place where I found him. He had been lying there soaked to the point of insensibility for two weeks. He was too horrible a sight for the eyes of any woman."

"What an end!" exclaimed Oswald. "The man once stood on a pinnacle that many an actor would give half a lifetime to win. He had—"

The Englishman and Merry both looked up quickly. Wentworth had dropped an armful of books noisily on his desk. He opened the door which led to the inner office, passed through, then slammed it sharply behind him.

CHAPTER XXV. THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

ORE than one "summer show" had begun to blazon an alluring sign over the door of a Broadway theater before "The House of Esterbrook" closed its season. The fame of the play had gone abroad through the country, and might after night, long after the residence part of New York showed a labyrinth of boarded fronts, every seat in the Gotham was sold before the curtain went up.

The house was packed to the roof on the night the play closed. It was the middle of June and the city had grown uncomfortably hot. Wentworth had spent a restless day. It seemed to him as if the air was filled with anticipation. He overheard the Breens discuss their plans for the summer in a Maine camp. Julie Volk had approached him, half shy, half eager, to tell of a shore cottage where they were to stay with Dorcas until [306]

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

the season opened. Telegrams came and went, everyone in the theater had plans except himself. He felt forsaken and isolated amid the excitement of a closing might. He had no ties — not a human being cared whether he came or went. There was a house — he held the title deeds for it, he paid taxes and hired servants to care for it — but it was not a home. Only a year ago the three of them had gone holidaying, as care-free as children. Ages had passed since last summer.

He wandered about the theater in aimless, unseeing fashion. The world seemed to have grown intolerable. He hated the gay laughter in the audience, the rustling of fans, and the buzz of voices between the acts. The orchestra had chosen airs that jarred upon his inmost nerves. He stood watching the throng when suddenly he wondered how he should meet tomorrow and every tomorrow of a long, lonely, inactive summer.

Before the curtain fell on the last act he strolled through the darkened house and opened a narrow door behind the lower boxes. A few shadowed steps led to the stage. A man stood inside with his fingers moving [307]

over the buttons, which flooded the stage with light or shadow. Wentworth pushed past him and walked swiftly behind the drops until he reached a corner which was comparatively deserted. He stood inside a wing, watching the company take their curtain calls. Last of all came Merry, alone. The insistent applause importuned a speech. Wentworth smiled grimly. Andrew's one terror was a speech. He saw the actor glance about him appealingly, then his eyes signaled to the man who controlled the curtain. It began to descend with quiet deliberation. Merry paused for a moment, then he came back.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I had hoped—"

While Wentworth stood listening he wondered why the descent of the curtain did not stop. He turned and whispered a command to the stagehand who stood beside him. The man's face was deathly white, he looked paralyzed with terror. In a second Enoch realized that something in the machinery had lost its grip. The house had grown still, while Merry stood smiling and talking in his

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

nonchalant fashion. A young man with a gleaming expanse of shirt front rose from a lower box and set his foot upon the railing. preparing to climb over to the stage. A woman stood beside him clasping her hands and staring at Merry with horror-stricken eyes. Her face grew as white as the lace robe she wore. Then she shrieked, a long, shivering cry of terror. Enoch sprang toward the footlights with one swift leap, holding his arm over his head as if to ward off the heavy curtain, which was still descending. He seized Merry with a desperate grip and tossed the actor far back on the stage, then he fell with the ponderous curtain across his inert body. His closed eyes were facing the glare of the footlights.

Dorcas and Merry, in a swift motor, reached the Waverly Place home before the ambulance, and a famous surgeon came close at their heels. When the operation was over they laid Wentworth upon his own bed. The surgeon stood looking down on the unconscious face. Blood was welling slowly from the wound on his forehead and made a wide stain upon the snowy bandage. The man

turned to look at Dorcas: her make-up lay in smudges upon her face and she wore the blue cotton gown which belonged to "Cordelia" in the last act; her fingers clenched each other, while she turned an imploring gaze to the quiet face of the surgeon.

"I do not know — yet," he whispered, answering the question in her eyes; "it is too soon to tell. He lived through it, and it is one of those operations when the patient does not always live."

Somebody led her away. In a dazed fashion she knew that Alice Volk bathed her face and braided her hair into two long strands and changed her stage gown for a soft kimono. Then Merry took her hand and she followed him to the library. She lay down upon a couch feeling as if every nerve in her body had an ear and it was listening. The house was perfectly still. Once in her mind she used that phrase, "Still as death." Afterwards she fell into a shivering fit; the tears came, and she sobbed so fiercely that the agony seemed to tear at her throat.

From a shadowy corner near the fireside Merry rose and crept across the room. He

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

dropped on his knees beside her and soothed her without a word, as one broods over an unhappy child. The warm grip in which he held her hand between his own gave her courage and hope. She rose to her feet and he led her to the window, where she sat down and looked out into the dark, quiet square. Out of her memory rose the thought of an early morning — it was only a year ago when she had seen Andrew Merry for the first time, stretched listlessly on the park bench, with a gray, thin fog occasionally blotting him from her sight. It was here. too, she had sat watching children scuffle through wind-blown leaves, while she heard her brother read the manuscript of "The House of Esterbrook." Merry sat silent at her side until the nurse entered the room.

"Miss Wentworth," she said, "Dr. Mowbray wants you. Your brother has been conscious for a few minutes. He cannot speak, but he wants something. Will you come?"

They followed the woman swiftly. Enoch's eyes sought hers with piteous pleading which was almost agony. She bent to kiss him.

His gaze traveled to Merry and the agony seemed to change to peace.

"You saved his life, Enoch," she whispered.

Andrew laid his fingers gently upon the nerveless hand which rested outside the sheet. The eyes of the two men met: in those of one was a mute prayer for forgiveness, in the other's shone gratitude and the old affection grown steadfast.

Enoch's lips moved. He was trying to speak. Dorcas laid her ear close to his mouth.

"He wants his keys," she said quickly.

The nurse left the bedside and returned with a bunch of small keys strung upon a steel ring. Dorcas laid them in her brother's hand. It was pitifully inert! She lifted them and ran them through her fingers, one by one, as a Catholic tells her beads in a rosary. Her gaze was fixed upon his eager eyes. When she touched a shining brass key a gleam of relief shone in the man's beseeching eyes. She rose to her feet.

"I will go at once, Enoch, and find it. I shall know what you want, whatever it is, and will bring it to you."

The doctor followed Merry and Dorcas to the [312]

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

door. "Don't come back unless I send for you.
The exertion has been too much for him."

"This is the key to a small drawer in Enoch's desk," explained the girl. "I can probably guess what he wants. I ought to show it to him. If his mind is set on something he may sleep quietly when he knows I have found it."

"I will call you if he does not sleep," said the doctor.

Merry walked to the window and stared vaguely into the darkness. A little clock on the mantel struck three. Once he looked over his shoulder at Dorcas. He could hear the crackle of stiff paper as she unfolded a few long, narrow sheets which were tied in a thin bundle.

"I have found Enoch's will and a number of business papers. Here are his bankbooks and the contract with Oswald for the play. There are bonds and things of that sort — things I do not understand. I imagine," the girl's voice broke into a sob, "it must be the will he wants."

"Probably it is, dear," said Andrew gently. She laid the papers on the desk and lifted [313]

a yellow envelope. There was no writing upon it; it was unsealed. She took out a slip of paper and stood motionless while she read it. Then her fingers moved in a groping way to turn on a blaze of electricity under the green globe above the desk.

"The room is so dark," she murmured.

She dropped the paper upon the blotter in front of her and leaned upon the desk with her face between her hands.

"Andrew." cried Dorcas with a stifled moan, "come here!"

He crossed the room and stood looking down over the girl's shoulder.

"See," she whispered, "see what I have found! Tell me what is it?" Her fingers pointed to the bond. She stretched out her hand as if searching blindly for protection and help. The man clasped it between his own, then she raised her eves to his.

"Was it this, Andrew, this that lay behind everything — that made you give up your play and -"

Merry's lips parted, but he did not speak. Dorcas glanced at the date. She withdrew her hands from his and put her fingers across [314]

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

her eyes as if trying desperately to remember something.

"Why," she cried suddenly, "the date was May 29, last year; that was two days after I came home from the convent." Her forehead knitted into a puzzled frown. "It must have been that night—that morning—when Enoch had a stag party, and I came in, after you had all gone. It was the first time I saw you. I have told you about it—when you sat out there, waiting for a 'bus."

"Yes," he whispered.

"Then afterwards," she raised her head with a quick gesture, "we went to Juniper Point. There you told me about your play—and you went away to write it?"

She paused, waiting for Merry to answer. She did not raise her eyes. Her head was bent as if she took the shame of her brother upon her own shoulders.

"Yes." The man spoke in a slow whisper.

"Then you came back, with the play finished, and read it to Enoch, and he—he claimed it—because he held this against you?" She laid a trembling finger upon the sheet of paper.

"Yes."

Dorcas sat perfectly still with her arms lying on the desk. Merry bent over and gently touched her cheek.

"Oh!" she shrank away from him with a shuddering cry. "Oh, how could you let him do such a thing! It was so cruel, so inconceivably cruel, so shameful, and so unjust! It was such a mistake! Why did you let my brother do such a thing?"

"I don't know." Merry spoke abruptly.

"Tell me why you let him do it," persisted the girl.

"I don't believe I can explain — to you." There was a hopeless tone in the man's voice. "For a while it seemed to me like a poker debt. Women cannot understand a poker debt."

"No, I cannot understand," confessed Dorcas. Then she went on hurriedly: "Was that your only reason?"

"No, I felt that way at first. Then — it seemed foolish. One night I determined for a minute to set myself free, to get the play back, and to make you understand. It was the night — that night — when you took me

THE YELLOW ENVELOPE

home — when you found me in the — when you gave me new courage and a fresh outlook on life — when you made a man of me."

Dorcas rose and stood facing him with her eyes searching his. "Why didn't you do it?" she asked.

"Because," said Merry unsteadily, "do you remember you—no I—I—asked you—when a man had fallen as low as I had if he had anything left that would pull him to his feet. You said, 'Yes, so long as he has honor, there is no end of a chance for him.'"

"Oh!" cried Dorcas aghast. "Oh, to think that I should have put that in your way!"

"Put what in my way? Dearest, that night I came around the corner — I had been wandering in the desert. Suddenly I found sunshine, I found love and hope, I found you. That night — when you went away — I began to understand that it was the most wonderful chance God ever put in a man's way."

An instant later his arms were about her and she felt his kiss upon her cheek.

"Don't," cried Dorcas. "Don't!" She freed herself from his clasp and held him away from her. "Can't you understand, [317] THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH don't you see, Andrew, after what Enoch

don't you see, Andrew, after what Enoch did to you, that I cannot be your wife?"

"You cannot — be — my —" He stared at her in bewildered dismay.

"Yes, that is what I mean," she whispered tremulously. "Don't you understand? How could I marry you with the thought of this horrible wrong constantly between us? I could never forget it. Remember it was Enoch, my brother—don't you understand?—my brother—who did this! How could you go on loving me and—"

"Remember — it was your brother who saved my life," said Merry passionately. "How could I go on loving you, dearest? How could I stop loving you? I could go through hell for you, and yet I confess I would rather be with you in heaven." He flushed and his face grew grave. "You are mine — all mine — and I am yours, so wholly and truly yours that I have grown to think of this world as merely one spot — one little spot — where we can make a home and I can have you beside me — for the rest of my life."

CHAPTER XXVI. IN THE DAYLIGHT

ENTWORTH'S chamber was dim as twilight when Merry entered. The outer world lay white and breathless under a dazzling sun, and the sudden change to a darkened sickroom for a moment made Andrew grope vaguely on the threshold. As his eves became accustomed to the dusk he saw a white-gowned nurse standing beside the bed. Under the sheet lay the motionless outline of the man's long body, the head wound with snowy bandages. Merry's hands gripped together convulsively. The nails cut into his palms and an ache which hurt tugged at his heart. Wentworth's chamber held memories for him: he thought of nights when he had lain helpless upon that same bed and Enoch had taken care of him in a lumbering fashion. During these days he had seen the rugged face grow wan from want of sleep; still for him a smile always lit the stern features.

Suddenly, as the last remnant of an old scab sloughs off, every fragment of hatred, of resentment at injustice, of pain and rebellion which for ten months had been warping his nature and clouding his life fell away from Merry's heart. The love, the implicit confidence, even the boyish dependence upon the older man, came flooding back into his soul like a high tide. All that had stood between him and Wentworth seemed unimportant compared with the vital fact that they had been and still were friends.

When the nurse beckoned he stole noiselessly across the floor. She pointed to a chair by the bedside. "He has dozed off," she explained in a low whisper. "He asked for you just before he went to sleep. I told him you were coming. Sit here so that he can see you when he wakes up."

Merry dropped into the chair. He began to see perfectly through the gloom. Wentworth's grim, gaunt face had startled him for a minute. The eyelids were closed, with depths of shadow below them. The man's dominating nose stood out like a silhouette against the white pillow. The mustache had

IN THE DAYLIGHT

been shaved away and lines, chiseled by days and nights of pain, wrinkled about the quiet mouth. Merry sat staring at the haggard face with a dull, tugging hope in his soul, which he could not voice even to Dorcas. He wanted time — time enough to tell Enoch that the old enmity was dead, that the old love was alive, strengthened by new ties. A spasm of pain ran through the sick man's face, wrinkling the pallid forehead and twitching the lips. Merry looked up at the nurse. She read the question in his eyes.

"No," she whispered, "he is going to live. His brain is clear now. He has a great constitution. That was the only thing that saved him."

The woman had a strong, intelligent face and her manner was full of calm conviction. She was not young and must have watched over many a battle between life and death. She knew! Merry sighed with relief and peace of mind, even with a mad throb of joy. The thought of Dorcas and the future came with the conviction that there was still time to take up the old bonds of love and to begin life again.

The face upon the pillow moved and Enoch's eyes opened slowly. Recognition flashed into them, then a smile crept about the lined mouth.

"Enoch!" The younger man dropped on his knees beside the bed, his fingers stole under the sheet and caught in a strong grasp the hand which he had thought was slipping from his reach.

Wentworth's eyes held a breathless question. "You were not hurt?" he whispered.

"No, old man; no. I didn't have a scratch. You took it all. You saved my life, as you have done more than once, and, Enoch, you understand — we are back where we stood in the old days, with everything forgotten, everything buried, buried so deep that neither of us will ever give it another thought."

The thrill of warmth over that strongest of all things human — a broken friendship made warm and secure again — ran like the vigor of transfused blood through the veins of the sick man. Happiness flushed into the wan face and his feeble strength returned Merry's grip.

Andrew laughed aloud. "You understand, [322]

IN THE DAYLIGHT

Enoch, we are friends — friends that nothing can separate again as long as life lasts."

The wistfulness of gratitude dimmed the eyes of the sick man. "As long as life lasts! That won't be a great while, Boy," he whispered huskily; "only now—it is all right—and it seems different. I felt like a coward a little while ago. You remember that writing chap who died lately? He said something just before he went. I thought of it this morning—'I'm afraid to go home in the dark'—wasn't that what he said? I felt lonely—and I knew—"

"Listen, Enoch." Merry spoke with a tone of passionate conviction. "Look here, old man, you're not going home in the dark, not yet. You've got thirty or forty years before that homegoing."

He turned imperatively to the nurse. "Push back the curtains, won't you? Push them away back. There's a glorious sun shining—let it in."

The woman understood. She ran up a curtain and flung back the shutters. The room grew suddenly white and radiant.

"There!" cried Merry. "Talk of going [523]

home in the dark? See how the sun is shining! Go home in the dark, the idea!"

A pathetic eagerness flushed into the eyes of the man on the bed. The glare of the sunshine showed clearly the wanness and ghastly shadows in the bandaged face.

"She says," the actor pointed over his shoulder at the white-gowned nurse, "she says you are out on the highroad — coming back to stay with us — indefinitely, do you understand, Enoch? She knows. Don't you?" He looked into the woman's face with ardent pleading in his eyes.

She smiled and nodded. She was the embodiment of health and vigor. Her stalwart body and her wholesome rosy face were pleasant for sick eyes to look upon. "Yes, you've come back," she said emphatically. "When the doctor left an hour ago he said we had pulled you safely around the corner. Now all the job I have cut out for me is to see you are kept quiet and patient and happy."

"Yes, happy — that's the biggest part of the prescription," repeated Merry with a laugh.

The sick man looked up. The confession in [324]

IN THE DAYLIGHT

his eyes was pathetic. "It seems ages since I was happy, Boy."

"Well, you're not going to be allowed to think, even to think of past ages. You've only to lie there and get well. It is our business — a sort of job cut out for Dorcas and me — to keep you happy. See?"

"I see," whispered Enoch. The flicker of a smile stole into his face. It brought peace and a pale, eager hopefulness, as if a thought of restitution and atonement was dawning in the man's soul. The nurse lowered the curtain and blotted out the radiance which flooded the room.

"The doctor has ordered quiet," she whispered, "and sleep—as much sleep as possible."

Merry rose and laid his hand on Went-worth's forehead. "You hear her orders, old man?" He laughed gaily. "It's no use running full tilt against the nursing profession. Each one of them thinks she knows it all! But I'm not going to say 'Goodbye.' I mean to hang around here from dawn to dark and drop in every time I can sneak past her — or the doctor!"

CHAPTER XXVII. A MORAL LESION

CCASIONALLY during Enoch's convalescence Dorcas found him listening to common noises about the house with a feverish anxiety which was half-terror.

"I don't know what he wants," said the nurse one day. "I wish I could find out. The doctor orders me not to bring up any subject that might disturb him. There's something on his mind, something that harasses him. Yesterday I stood on the stair speaking to Mrs. Volk and I left him asleep. When I went back he was leaning on his elbow and his eyes were fixed on the door as if he dreaded seeing some one come in. He asked who the woman was I had been talking to. His temperature had gone up. I wish I knew what he is worrying about."

"I think I understand," said Dorcas.

She returned to the sickroom carrying a bit of needlework. An eager smile came into her brother's eyes when she opened the door.

He lay propped up with pillows. She sat down beside his bed. "Shall I read?" she asked.

"No; go on with your sewing. I like to see your hands fly with that bright silk between your fingers. Men have an idea that women are one-sided creatures. They are mistaken. You sew beautifully, and yet, while you stitch, I think of your 'Cordelia.'"

It was the first time since his accident that Wentworth had mentioned the theater or business of any sort. Dorcas began to trace out the pattern she was embroidering with the point of her needle. Her fingers trembled. She spoke without looking up.

"You haven't cared to hear about business, Enoch. There are some things you may want to know, since you are strong again. Mr. Oswald sailed for England a fortnight ago. He hated to go, leaving you before the critical point was passed, but the Strand Theater offered open time for August and it had to be attended to. He is rehearsing an English company now for 'The House.'"

"Didn't he want you for it?" asked Went-worth.

"Yes; but I should not have gone even if you had been well. He has given 'Cordelia' to Miss Embury, an English girl. He says she will play it beautifully. We are to open here on the twentieth of October. The whole company has been re-engaged. Mr. Oswald said he did not believe you would care to make any changes. There is only one new member - Helen Capron will play 'Mrs. Esterbrook.' Miss Paget went to London three weeks ago."

Dorcas did not raise her eves while she The silk thread had knotted and she spoke. sat disentangling it with her needle.

"As soon as you are able to travel we are going to take you away somewhere. city is hot."

Enoch stared out at the window. is 'we'?" he questioned.

A wave of scarlet crept across the girl's face.

"Andrew Merry has offered to help care for you until you are quite strong again," she answered without raising her eyes.

There still were gray shadows in his face and wan hollows and wrinkles about his mouth. His hair had whitened at the temples. Physically the man had changed, but a new [328]

tranquillity had begun to smooth away lines of worry and care in the colorless face.

"And begin life over again?" he asked.

"Yes," said the girl gently.

A pathetic eagerness came into his face; then it grew still with the gravity of a man who had almost touched hands with death. Into the wrinkles about his mouth crept the old dogged determination, tempered by a humility which Dorcas had never seen before. She flung her work aside, dropped on her knees, and drew her brother's face close against her own.

"Dorry," he said after a long silence, "when Andrew comes I want to see him alone."

"He is downstairs now," she answered.

"Send him up, won't you — and do you mind if he comes alone? Afterwards I want you."

The girl hesitated. "Of course. But do you think you are strong enough to visit much?"

"I spoke to the doctor this morning and he said talking would not hurt unless I got excited. Andrew isn't an exciting fellow."

"You're looking uncommonly well for a sick man," said Merry when he entered the room a few moments later.

"So do you, Boy!" Enoch's eyes crinkled with a smile. "You look happy - tremendously happy."

"Of course I am tremendously happy. Why shouldn't I be tremendously happy? I never saw a more glorious day; I have you back, well and strong, the same stanch old friend you always were; I've signed a contract for next season in figures which would have given me dizzy spells five years ago, and —"

"And —" A pathetic eagerness came into Enoch's face.

"Why, bless my soul, isn't that enough to set the average human on transcendental stilts?"

"Andrew, you're half angel!" cried Wentworth. There was a quaver in his voice.

"Half angel, you ridiculous old muddle head!" Merry smiled in his engaging way. "There's no surplus of angel fiber in any man — angels are feminine." The comedian's eyes became grave for a moment. [330]

"Still, I might have been gadding about on wings today if it hadn't been for you. Your courage—"

"Courage!" Wentworth started as if he had been struck. "Andrew, never use that word about me again! It wasn't courage that made me snatch you from death. Oftentimes men who in cold blood are utter cowards leap forward and rescue some one from death. That isn't courage!" He paused, as if a word had escaped him. "It is blind, instinctive impulse — the natural impulse you find even in a savage."

"You're too weak yet to argue." Merry's voice was conclusive. "Only — one thing is certain," he turned his thumb toward the floor: "I am here instead of — there."

"Andrew," the sick man's face flushed, "take these." He pulled a bunch of small keys, threaded upon a steel ring, from under his pillow. "Won't you unlock the little drawer at the left of my desk and bring it to me?"

"Don't go in for any sort of work now, Enoch. Your duty at present is to lie there and get well."

"I want that drawer, now."

Merry stared at him for a moment, then he obeyed, and returned to the room with the drawer in his hand. "Do you think," the actor paused again and asked anxiously. "do you think that you are strong enough yet to attend to business?"

"This isn't business." Enoch's face grew peremptory. "I'm strong enough for this. I'm not a praying man, Andrew, but I lay in the dark last night thanking God that he had let me live long enough to - make restitution. I can't make full restitution. It seems to me as if I had been living on the brink of hell for half a lifetime. Let me come back," he pleaded, "back — so I can look decent people in the face again."

Merry did not speak. He sat watching Enoch's wasted fingers search through a mass of papers in the little drawer. He lifted out a bankbook and a yellow envelope, then he set the drawer aside and laid the leather-covered booklet upon Merry's knee.

"That is yours," he explained. "You will find there every cent of royalties from 'The House.' It was banked apart from my

private account. It grew amazingly during the spring. You are a wealthy man."

Andrew opened it and glanced through the pages. He looked bewildered for a moment.

"Jehu! What can I do with so much money? I swear, Enoch, I don't care a picayune for being a wealthy man except —"

Wentworth did not answer. He was staring at a slip of paper he had drawn from the yellow envelope. "You remember this, Andrew?" he asked abruptly.

Merry nodded. He caught a glimpse of Wentworth's name and his own upon the flimsy thing they had called the bond. Enoch leaned back against the pillow and began to destroy the paper with slow deliberation, tearing it across and across until it was reduced to a heap of flakes which fluttered down into the hollow of his gaunt palm. He shook them into the envelope and handed it to Merry, who took it without a word and slipped it between the leaves of the bankbook.

"If you can trust me, Boy, until the right time comes and I reach the right place, I will make full restitution before the world."

"Don't, old man! let us bury this now and [383]

forever. Good God! isn't it restitution enough to have saved my life?"

"No," Enoch spoke with swift passion, "no, it isn't restitution. Don't stand in my way. You have to humor sick men, you know. Besides, I want to lay my soul bare to you now, Andrew. Had I been a Catholic I should have done it to a priest long ago, I suppose."

"Go ahead, Enoch, I'll listen," he said gently.

Wentworth turned in bed and clasped his hands around one bent knee. "Years ago," he began brusquely, "I was wandering about in the Tennessee mountains on an assignment when I fell in with a chap who taught psychology in Yale. He was nothing wonderful, but his science was fascinating. Time and again, since those days, I have planned, if I could find the leisure, to go into psychology and study the thing out. Still, any man who knocks about the world as I have done learns a lot of psychology that isn't in books. He has to puzzle things out for himself. There must be something alluring, though, to be able to reduce the promptings of one's own

soul to a science and then to work out a problem in yourself. Don't you think so?"

"I should imagine so. Still, it's an unopened book to me," Merry admitted.

"We used to sit and talk every night around the campfire. I remember once this young MacGregor explained to me why a man we had both known committed murder. He killed his wife first, then, horror-stricken, shot himself. It's a common enough story, you read it in the papers every day of the week. but it came close to us because we had both known the fellow well. He was a decent. quiet, cheerful citizen, with a genial, kindly way about him. His taking off seemed a mystery. None of us had even seen him angry. Suddenly he turned into a flaming fiend, a murderer, and a suicide. Nothing but insanity or the Yale man's theory explained it."

"What was his theory?"

Wentworth paused for a minute with a haunted look in his eyes. "He claims that the morals of every human being are molded during the first twenty years of his life. Into a fairly decent career there comes occasionally

- for the life of me I can't remember his technical name for it - I should call it a moral lesion. Some sin which a man has committed, and you might say lived down, before he was twenty, crops out again years after and it conquers him. Each time he may repent and turn over a new leaf. The world looks on him not as an Admirable Crichton perhaps, but as a tolerably good Then suddenly, without the ghost fellow. of a warning, even after he imagines he has outgrown the tendency to that particular sin, there comes a temptation, and he goes under as if his backbone was gristle. He falls as quick as that!"

Wentworth paused for a moment and snapped his fingers. "Curious, isn't it?" he added.

"It certainly is curious," agreed Merry.

"When the career of this murderer was brought to the light of day, they found that once when he was a schoolboy, and again, when a friend stole his sweetheart, he might have committed murder if a weapon had been at hand. The third time a gun lay close to his elbow."

Andrew Merry did not speak, but sat watching Enoch with bewilderment in his eyes.

"I am going to tell you about two lesions which occurred in my own life. There was a third—you know about that one yourself."

Across the pale face of the invalid swept a wave of scarlet: then he began to talk slowly and hesitatingly. "I was in a Southern academy the first time it happened. I must have been seventeen or thereabouts. Prizes were to be given for a public oration and people were coming from everywhere to hear us. The governor was to address us. My father was a lawyer, one of the big lawyers of the He went to this school when he was a state. boy, and he had carried off the oration prize. His heart was set on my winning it. I toiled and toiled over that speech; it was about the death of Julius Cæsar. I can remember, as I lay awake nights staring out into the darkness, how the speech came throbbing in my brain. I could never write, though, as I declaimed it to myself in the still dormitory. I used to go out into the woods and try to

write. One day I gave up. I sat huddled against a stone wall which ran down the hill, dividing a pasture from the forest. There was a tall pine over my head and the crows were calling from the top of it. I can see the place yet."

Enoch lifted his eyes and turned to meet the steady glance of the man who sat beside the bed.

"Do you want to hear the story out?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes — if you are bound to tell it."

"It isn't an easy task to set the stark naked soul of a man before another's gaze, especially when it's a man's own soul; but I've been over this, step by step, during these bedridden days, and I'll feel better when it's out of my system."

"Are you sure?" Merry spoke gently.

"Yes, sure." The reflective tone had gone from Enoch's voice. It was emphatic. "Out there in the sunshine," he continued, "I realized what defeat meant. I knew my oration was merely a babble of senseless words; there was not a throb in it. Besides, I knew that I could not make it better. Suddenly,

on the quiet hillside, I heard a voice close beside me."

There was a long pause. Wentworth turned his eyes away from Merry and stared out at the window. A trumpet vine climbed over the back of the Waverly Place house and one scarlet blossom hung vivid between him and the sunshine.

"Say, old fellow," said Merry in a low voice, "you and I are friends, closer friends than we ever were. What's the use of raking up old memories if they hurt? The story of something you did when you were in swaddling clothes doesn't count. Drop it!"

"It does count," answered Wentworth stolidly. "I tell you it does count. It is the only thing that explains what I did — when you called my bluff. I have lain here — I've had days and nights with nothing to do but to think and to analyze things. Why, old man, I haven't had a chance like this for years before. Let me tell you my story; it's interesting even if it isn't much to my credit."

"All right, have your own way."

"I sat there in the shadow of the wall listening. It was young David Ross prac[339]

tising his oration. Dave came of what the niggers called 'po' white trash,' but he had ambition and genius and was working his way through school like a man. He had chosen the death of Cæsar, as I had. I crouched there, scarcely breathing; I was afraid he would hear me and stop. speech was great! As I sat looking out over the valley I could see the Roman warrior while he stood in the Senate, down and out. hooted at and reviled, yet haughty and defiant, facing the enemies who had once been his friends. I began to sob, as a boy does in a shamed, husky, choked fashion. Suddenly a thought came to me. I leaped over the wall and held before Dave a new twenty-dollar gold-piece Father had given me that morning. It bought his oration."

Wentworth paused as if in an embarrassment of shaine. Merry watched him in silence.

"I feel — even now — the reluctant grip with which Dave held on to those sheets of blurred foolscap. I never gave a thought to what I had done. Every moment for twentyfour hours was needed to commit Dave's [840]

speech to memory. My father, proud and happy, gave me another twenty-dollar gold-piece. I carried it to Dave. He refused it, turning his back on me with angry scorn. Twenty years later I met him again. He had gone to Congress and was blasting his way upward towards fame. I was assigned to interview him. He remembered me instantly. For a moment he stared at me from head to foot, then he turned away without a word and never touched the hand I offered him. My God! how that hurt!" A shiver went through the man's body.

"That happened twenty-five years ago," said Merry hesitatingly. "You can't lay up a boyhood sin against a man. He changes—he's almost another human being."

"No, he isn't," answered Wentworth doggedly. "I want to show you that the psychological fellow was in the right. That was my first fall from grace; but there was a second lesion. It was worse, worse even than — than what I did to you, Merry. I was out in the Balkan mountains where the blamed barbarian Turks go tearing at each other's throats once in so often. The world looked

on, waiting for a story of war. I had none to tell, nothing happened but a skirmish or two once in a while. There was nothing a man could make into a story. It was a wretched campaign. Young Forsyth, of the Tribune, and I hung together through it for months, living like stray dogs, sick to death of our job, and ready to throw it up at any One morning at daybreak we were moment. awakened by shooting. We scrambled from the cave where we had slept and looked down into the valley. We were in the very heart of a battle, and these savages were climbing over the rocks with their cutlasses flashing. They shrieked like maniacs, the bullets went flying about our heads. I crept back to the hole among the rocks where we had spent the night. I couldn't see what was happening: I didn't want to see. Death shricks echoed all around It was the most hellish din and above me. of battle I ever listened to. I had turned coward. I lay there with every tooth in mv head chattering. A nice confession for a man to make, eh?" asked Wentworth with a grim smile.

Merry half rose then dropped back into his

chair. "Hold on, Enoch, I swear you're not fit for this sort of thing! Your temperature will go up, then the nurse—"

"Damn the nurse. I'm fit enough: keep still. I want to finish my story. Forsyth, the intrepid young fool, went creeping along the face of the cliff. He had never seen a battle before. I called to him to lie low, but he never heeded me. Through a crevice in the rock I saw him stretch his head over the chasm and crane his neck, then plunge down and begin to write as if he were mad. Once I sneaked out and tried to drag him in beside me. He fought like a wildcat, so I went back to shelter. The bullets pinged on the rocks Suddenly I heard a low, all around me. gurgling, awful cry and somebody called my name in a hoarse shout. It was Forsyth. I crept out. He stood on a cliff above me, clutching at his throat, then he toppled and fell. He came plunging down over the rocks until he reached my feet. He was dead, stark dead, when I pulled him into the cave. His notebook was clutched so tight in his hand that I tore a corner from one page as I took it from his fingers. I buried him right there.

"After a little while the battle fizzled down to a stray shot or two. That night under the gleam of a sputtering little torch I read Forsyth's story. It was tremendous - perfectly tremendous! It read like inspired stuff. I had never dreamed the fellow had such a vocabulary. And he lav there close beside me, asleep — under the damp, warm, soft earth. I had a fit of the horrors. I put out my light, stuffed the pages of writing in my pocket, then went doubling and twisting down those wild mountains, dodging the enemy's campfires and their infernal bullets, until I reached the miserable little town in the valley where we two men had our head-I hurried to the telegraph office quarters. to send out Forsyth's story to the Tribune, with the news of his death. I was waiting to get the wire when somebody handed me a cable. I looked at it half-dazed. It came from my own paper, crazy because I had sent them no story; they were hungry as vultures for news. As soon as I could get a wire I sent out Forsyth's story."

"Under his name?" asked Merry quietly.
"No." Enoch lifted his head, looked at
[344]

his friend with guilt and shame in his eyes, then he turned away. "No, I signed my own name to it. I sent it to my own paper. I wired the news of Forsyth's death to the *Tribune*."

Neither of the men spoke for some minutes. When Merry turned, Wentworth lay staring at him with a prayer for pity, comprehension, and forgiveness in his eyes.

"I want you to understand one thing," pleaded the older man. "When you called my bluff that morning and I wrote that bond. I was innocent of any thought of injury to you. I don't know what was in my mind. It was nothing in the world but an idle fancy. I told you so at the time. I did not dream that you could write a play. If anyone had told me you were capable of turning out 'The House of Esterbrook' I should have laughed at him. Then that day, when you came and read the manuscript — I had just given up all hope, as I did with the oration on Cæsar. I had been toiling for years and years on a play. There was one - it had seemed to me like a great plot — but I had begun to realize that labor does not mean everything. You want THE LAPSE OF ENOCH WENTWORTH inspiration, or genius or art — or something, and I didn't have it."

Enoch paused, wrinkling his eyes as if in an attempt to remember something. "I was trying to think of something Ellen Terry wrote on the back of a photograph she once gave me. It ran like this:

"'When am I to be an actress? Well, after fifteen years labor, perhaps. Labor! Why, I thought it was all inspiration. No, labor and art are the foundation; inspiration—a result.'

"Terry wasn't altogether right. Labor alone won't land the prize. You've proved that, Boy."

"I don't know," said Merry vaguely.

"I do." The man's pale face flushed. "When you dropped in on me, eager as a young victor for a laurel wreath, I knew as surely as if a judge had passed sentence on me that my years and years of toil meant nothing but waste paper. Then, suddenly, as temptation had clutched at me twice before in my life, came a ravening desire for fame—the fame that another man had labored for and—"

"I understand," cried Merry. There was

A MORAL LESION

a thrill of compassion in his voice. "Now, dear old man, let's forget it. The one thing I can never forget is that you have raked me from the depths more than once. I might have been worse than dead today if it hadn't been for you."

"You never descended to the depths I did," said Wentworth abruptly.

"Sin — my variety of it or yours — is nothing but the difference in a man's taste. His palate dictates what he will eat. There is a moral palate, and if you go on slaking your appetite, there's a weakening of the moral tissue. Isn't that what your psychologists call it? If it had not been for you, Enoch, I might have been worse than dead today." Merry uttered the last sentence in an undertone. "I have a feeling, though, that I can never go so low again, because —"

He sat silent for a minute. Wentworth's eyes were fixed upon him like an insistent question. "Because, Enoch," he went on in a steady voice, "because Dorcas has promised to be my wife."

"Oh!" cried Wentworth quickly. "Oh, thank God for that!"

CHAPTER XXVIII. BEHIND THE CURTAIN

T was a wet night in October. A line of carriages moved slowly over the shining asphalt to the door of the Gotham. Grant Oswald stood in a corner of the foyer watching the throng pour in.

"This beats your first night in London, doesn't it?" queried a newspaper man who stood beside him.

"Yes," acceded the Englishman. "The first night or any other night."

"Wentworth's escape from death was a great ad — if you look at it that way. He had a close call."

"Yes." Oswald spoke absently.

That morning he had arrived from London. Although he was the least curious of men, he felt as if the people from whom he had parted four months ago were living in a different atmosphere. Before the ship docked he had discovered a group waiting to welcome him. Dorcas was there, her beautiful face glowing with happiness. He watched her untie a gray

scarf from her hat and wave it. Merry stood beside her, but the girl's hand was clasped inside her brother's arm. Wentworth was wan and thin. Across his temple gleamed a wide red scar. Merry lifted his hat when he caught sight of Oswald and the wind tossed down, almost into his eyes, the wavy lock of long fair hair which proclaimed his calling. Alice Volk stood in the group, with Julie jumping impatiently beside her. Little Robin clasped her hand, while he searched for the ship with his sightless eyes.

With a courteous "Good night" Oswald left the man and walked into the theater, where a gay, chattering crowd streamed past him. The throng was so dense that he was pushed into a corner. When the overture began he moved toward the rail and took his place among a group of men who had not been able to buy seats. He found Singleton, of the *Times*, at his elbow.

"I'm glad to see you back and glad you've come back to such a house. Why, it's one of the biggest I ever saw in New York. You fellows must be raking in the shekels."

"It does look that way," Oswald smiled. "I don't know how long it will hold out. The play has already gone far beyond my expectations."

"It ought to last through several seasons. Generally a drama that pulls at the heart strings has a clutch on the purse strings of the public. Besides, vou've a great card in your Miss Wentworth, to say nothing of Merry. She's out of sight! Why, I've run in, Heaven knows how often, for that third act. I can't think of any big actress who could get as much out of that situation as Dorcas Wentworth does. There are minutes when it doesn't seem as if the girl were acting - she lives the character from start to finish."

"I believe you are right," acknowledged Oswald.

Before the third act began the house settled down to that silence which means intense anticipation. When the curtain fell, the applause rose to a deafening clamor. player after another appeared to take an encore. Last of all came Dorcas. She stood on the stage alone, smiling and bowing. Her face was radiantly happy. When the curtain dropped, the applause began again. Went-

worth appeared, leading Merry by the hand. The face of the older man looked pallid and the red scar cut lividly across his forehead. A stillness fell upon the house. It seemed to Oswald as if the people waited intently for some unusual event.

Enoch Wentworth raised his hand with a gesture which was strangely dramatic for a man who was neither an actor nor an orator. Like a flash Oswald remembered a day when he sat watching a prisoner at the bar. The man had been condemned to death; a moment later, with a stifled cry of terror, he stretched out his arm for mercy and sympathy.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Wentworth began, in a voice which was low, but so marvelously distinct that each syllable carried to the farthest seat in the house, "this is not a curtain speech — you have not called me before the footlights tonight; it is an explanation. It is a — confession."

Enoch paused as if mustering strength to go through an ordeal. He felt the curious scrutiny of a thousand eyes. "It is a confession," he repeated slowly, "a confession which has been long delayed—"

He never finished his sentence. Merry stepped forward and laid his hand upon the man's arm with a clinging grasp which was full of affection, even while it pushed Wentworth aside.

"Allow me." Then he laughed. "Good people, one and all, who have so long been friends of mine, this is my confession, late in the day, as my friend Wentworth suggests, but it is mine. He was simply breaking the news to you that I wrote 'The House of Esterbrook.'"

He hesitated for a moment, then Enoch touched his arm as if in protest. Merry smiled and gently put him aside. A whisper of startled surprise ran through the house, followed by a moment of hush, then applause. It subsided slowly. During the tumult men and women who kept their eyes upon the stage saw Wentworth turn as if pleading vehemently. Merry answered with a few decisive words, then he stepped down to the footlights.

"We have saved this confession, ladies and gentlemen," he began gravely, "not to create a sensation or to further advertise the play, but each one of you must realize how the

public distrusts a jack-of-all-trades. Many of you doubted the ability of a Merry Andrew to touch human emotion ever so lightly, and came that first night with eager curiosity to see him in the character of 'John Esterbrook.' How much more would you have hesitated if you had known that this same Merry Andrew was the author of the play? Hence the secret, to deceive you until an honest verdict had been rendered. Tonight I release my friend Enoch Wentworth from the rôle he has carried for ten months. I also wish, before you, to acknowledge a large indebtedness to him. For years he has been the truest friend a man ever had. He has believed in me, encouraged me, and to his untiring labor you are indebted for much of the perfect detail which carried 'The House of Esterbrook' to success."

The audience saw Wentworth stare as if in utter amazement when Merry began his confession. Then his eyes grew misty, and when the young actor turned to him with an affectionate smile, he gripped the hand held out to him as a man does when he cannot put love or gratitude into words. Across the

foothights men and women realized vaguely, through the strange human insight we call intuition, that another drama was being played before their eyes; a life-and-blood drama, where the feelings of strong men were deeply stirred.

"Good Lord!" said Singleton.

Oswald turned with a start as if he had been aroused from sleep. The newspaper man stood at his elbow with a look of blank astonishment in his eyes.

"What's back of all that?" he asked. "I can understand that Merry wrote the play. I've known Enoch Wentworth for years, and I was never so staggered in my life as the first night when I saw 'The House of Esterbrook.' I went to the office afterwards to write my stuff and I sat for ten minutes — dumb, stupid — trying to figure out how Wentworth, the Enoch Wentworth I knew, could have written it. How long have you known this?"

"I have known it," answered Oswald quietly, "just as long as you have."

"Then I'm right," cried Singleton. "I knew Merry was lying when he stood there [354]

on the stage giving us that bluff about Wentworth carrying the secret for him. wrote it all right. I might have guessed it long ago. I say, do you know there's a devil of a big story back of all that?"

Oswald's face grew stern.

"You see I know both of the men so well." went on Singleton eagerly. "Why, they were a regular David and Jonathan pair ever since I met them first. Enoch was forever setting Merry on his pins. The actor would go off. Heaven knows where, throw over a part, and drop off the edge of the world. I don't believe he dissipated exactly; he simply tossed his money away and went downhill. Wentworth would hunt him up and drag him back where he belonged. He straightened up suddenly when he began to play 'John Esterbrook.' You can't even pull him into a poker game now. I guess I took the winnings at the last game he stood in for. That night I had a great mind to hand the money back to him. We said 'Goodbye' about daylight. He looked pessimistic and glum. No, he wasn't glum either; Merry never gets glum. He had a down-and-out, don't-give-a-damn expression [355]

that morning. I can see him yet. Suddenly he disappeared again. When he came back Wentworth and he cut each other dead. That Paget woman affair began, then Wentworth saved Merry's life. Why, it's a tremendous story!"

Oswald turned abruptly. Something in his quiet gaze made Singleton shift his eyes with a start of guilt. "I want to say a word to you," the Englishman's voice was stern, "and I want you to repeat what I say to every man in your fraternity. There may be a big story somewhere behind this — I cannot tell. there is, if an enmity or a misunderstanding did exist, if there was a wrong done, or if anything lies between these two men which we do not comprehend, leave it to them. have buried it. Don't turn ghoul," he pleaded, "and dig it up, simply to make a curious, heartless world buy your paper for a day or I am told there is a bond between newspaper men, like a warm-hearted brotherhood. Wentworth belonged to that brotherhood: he does vet - remember that."

Singleton stretched out his hand with an impulsive gesture. "Thank you, Mr. Oswald.

[356]

You're a good deal of a man. I never knew you before. We all need a jog on the elbow once in a while. A newspaper man grows a buzzard when a story is in the air. He forgets how the other fellow feels. I'll pass the word around. I can promise you that not a man among us will do anything but take Merry's word for it. His confession is a big story in itself."

"Thank you," said Oswald with a cordiality which few men had seen in the dignified Englishman.

He stood talking with a group who gathered about him at the close of the play, eager as Singleton had been to discuss Merry's dramatic confession, when an usher interrupted them.

"Mr. Oswald, you're wanted back of the scenes," said the boy.

Under the white glare of electricity a little group stood on the half-dismantled stage. The people in the cast were there—property men, the call boy, electricians, ushers, and the humblest employee of the house. The actors still wore their stage garb and make-up. Dorcas' hand was linked in her brother's arm.

For a moment Oswald stood watching her. Her face was flushed, her eyes shone, she seemed transfigured by happiness.

Merry stretched out a welcoming hand to Oswald. "We've been waiting for you, Oswald, to round out our circle," he cried gaily. "I had a Scotch grandmother. When she reached the Western wilderness and built a home, she made her husband carve over the chimney-piece: 'We're a' sibb tae ane anither here.' Once, when I was a little boy, she explained it to me. I understood. The English language won't translate these words, but they mean that there's nobody here but the best of friends. Because we are a' sibb tae ane anither here tonight I want to break a secret to you. It is a more wonderful secret than the news I gave to the audience."

Merry looked about him with a quick, boyish smile. "I used to say I could not make a curtain speech to save my life. Tonight I feel as if I were blossoming out. I seem capable of speeches behind the curtain as well as in front. I suppose happiness makes an orator of a man." He laughed joyously. "But — to my secret. This dear lady, whom

you all love and honor, has promised to be my wife."

He held out his hands to Dorcas and caught hers, then he drew her into his arms as if they stood alone in some empty corner of the world.



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